



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



MONDAY — 6 DEC 2021

	International	National	Regional and Local
Events, Opportunities Go to articles	12/06 China 'zero-Covid' goal achievable? 12/06 China warns US over Olympics boycott 12/06 Ukraine army day vow: fight off Russia 12/06 US embassy: Japan police racial profiling 12/06 Taiwan firms ties with Europe 12/05 Europe doubles-down on mandates 12/05 Omicron spread puts Europe on edge 12/05 Italy unvaccinated face new restrictions 12/05 India highest Covid death toll since July 12/05 Germany advises against Christmas travel 12/05 Brussels: protest against virus restrictions 12/05 Japan's new military muscle flexing 12/05 India villagers protest as army kills 15 12/05 Myanmar ousted president, mayor jailed 12/05 Myanmar court jails ousted civilian leader 12/05 Myanmar military vehicle plows protesters 12/05 China military base Africa Atlantic coast? 12/05 Study: Indo-Pacific risk of war 'significant' 12/05 China tariffs fuel US trade boom w/Taiwan 12/05 Saudi coalition Yemen increases air strikes 12/04 Rio de Janeiro cancels NYE party 12/04 Scientists race to understand omicron 12/04 Omicron plunges world into uncertainty 12/04 Vienna: 40,000 protest Covid restrictions 12/04 South Africa effort stanch virus mutations 12/04 Switzerland backtracks foreign travel rules 12/04 Britain omicron cases: tightens restrictions 12/04 Syria's Assad tightens grip 12/04 NKorea heads into 'tense' winter 12/04 China communists bash US democracy 12/04 Indonesia deaths, injuries as volcano erupts 12/04 US: Iran walks back prior nuke concessions 12/03 Study: most vaccines work as boosters 12/03 Clues: omicron spread at Norway party 12/03 Omicron spreads quickly in South Africa 12/03 Omicron make Covid more transmissible? 12/03 Europe: Iran nuclear talks head for collapse	12/06 Omicron spread: concern for mental health 12/06 US diplomatic boycott Beijing Olympics? 12/05 Increases: new cases, Covid deaths 12/05 Officials: omicron cases likely to rise 12/05 Study: J&J booster works well w/Pfizer 12/05 Surgeon Gen. 'more vigilant'; not panic 12/05 Covid outbreak New Orleans cruise ship 12/05 Search for clues to omicron spread in US 12/05 Omicron outpaced public health response 12/05 Displaced still wait Hurricane Ida FEMA aid 12/05 China tariffs fuel US trade boom w/Taiwan 12/05 Gas prices drop 2 cents over 2 weeks 12/04 Vaccine demand and wait times grow 12/04 Drugstores squeezed: staff shortages 12/04 Omicron 'most mutated virus ever seen'? 12/04 Detection omicron expands across states 12/04 Study: omicron link to common cold virus 12/04 Omicron variant: new iteration coronavirus 12/04 Michigan shooting: school responsibility? 12/04 Food insecurity persists: communities act 12/04 December weather extremes across country 12/04 US: Russia plans possible Ukraine invasion 12/04 China space capabilities could outpace US? 12/04 DOD secretary: 'America is a Pacific power' 12/03 Mask mandate public transit thru 18 March	12/06 Floods: death, destruction to dairies 12/05 Federal Way to ramp up police hiring 12/05 Benefits of La Nina skew to WA than OR 12/04 Omicron variant discovered in WA 12/04 Vax hesitant workers get jobless benefits 12/04 King Co. requires small business vax proof 12/04 Shipping backlog hits food banks 12/04 Seattle homelessness budget frustrates 12/04 Health One alternative Seattle 911 response 12/04 Seattle settlement Charleena Lyles shooting 12/03 DOH: 780,835 cases, 9413 deaths 12/03 Whatcom Co. initial flood damage: \$50M 12/03 Shortage: Christmas tree prices increasing
Cyber Awareness Go to articles	12/06 Cross-site leak attacks on web browsers 12/05 BitMart Exchange hacked: \$150M stolen 12/04 Malvertising: malicious Chrome extensions 12/04 Spy tool state-sponsored hack of Ugandans 12/03 Fake support agents call SMS victims 12/03 Black Friday shoppers: 1/3rd fake, bots 12/03 Hackers: incident response chat rooms 12/03 Fraudsters Omicron phishing campaign 12/03 Pakistan hackers hit India, Afghan govts 12/03 Threat actor behind malicious Tor relays 12/03 Germany warns: cyberattacks over holidays	12/06 Ransomware gangs hide plain site: Russia 12/05 Upstate New York fuels bitcoin boom 12/05 Cyberattack strikes Maryland health dept. 12/05 Phishing uses fake Office 365 spam alerts 12/05 Military action against ransomware groups 12/04 Bitcoin tumbles after Wall Street selloff 12/03 FBI: Cuba ransomware group 12/03 State Dept. workers targeted by malware 12/03 Crooks selling access to hacked networks 12/03 Crypto scammers lure victims: phishing site	
Terror Conditions Go to articles	12/06 Gunmen attack Niger military base 12/05 Taliban summary killings ex-soldiers, police 12/04 Mali: militants fire on bus; 31 killed 12/04 Afghanistan gripped by starvation 12/03 Taliban bans forced marriages for women 12/03 Taliban award fighters land in Afghanistan	12/04 NJ military base houses 11,000 Afghans	
Suspicious, Unusual Go to articles	12/06 China modified weather for celebrations? 12/03 Desertification slow-motion climate disaster	12/06 NWS: Hawaii faces 'catastrophic flooding' 12/03 Western snow to vanish years at a time?	12/05 Mystery: Oregon gray wolves poisoned 12/03 Seattle mayor missing texts report missing?
Crime, Criminals Go to articles	12/05 Drug empire built on Syria's ruins 12/05 Drug gangs fight over Mexico resort town 12/05 Israel: teen driver in vehicle ramming killed 12/04 Jerusalem: Israel police kill knife attacker 12/04 Belgium port city grapples: flood of cocaine	12/06 Report: 'hostile behaviors' jump in schools 12/05 CBP seizes \$30M fake handbags, clothing 12/05 Michigan schools order investigation 12/05 Key events leading to school shooting 12/04 Michigan shooting suspect parents arrests	12/05 Salvation Army bell ringer robbed 12/05 Forks, PD chief, jail supervisor face lawsuit 12/04 Police: man shot near International District 12/03 Trial date set for Pierce Co. sheriff 12/03 Racial disparities WSP traffic stops?

		12/04 Charge: Mich. juveniles threatened schools 12/04 'Modern-day slavery' uncovered in Georgia 12/04 DOJ charges 2: Proud Boys ties; Jan 6 riots 12/04 Texas police officer fatally shot 12/04 Brutal, brazen crimes shake L.A. 12/03 'Flash mob' robberies roil retailers 12/03 Retail issue: thefts become more brazen	12/03 SPD investigates 5 overnight shootings 12/03 Explosive set off outside Islamic Center 12/03 Teen charged in threats against schools
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Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 US diplomatic boycott Beijing Olympics?
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/05/politics/biden-beijing-olympics-boycott/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The Biden administration is expected to announce this week that no US government officials will attend the 2022 Beijing Olympics, implementing a diplomatic boycott of the games, according to several sources.</p> <p>The move would allow the US to send a message on the world stage to China without preventing US athletes from competing. The National Security Council, which has been privately discussing the boycott, declined to comment.</p> <p>President Joe Biden told reporters last month that he was weighing a diplomatic boycott as Democratic and Republican lawmakers, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, advocated for one in protest of China's human rights abuses.</p> <p>A full boycott is not expected, meaning US athletes will still be allowed to compete. The last time the US fully boycotted the Olympics was in 1980 when former President Jimmy Carter was in office.</p> <p>In response to the news, Beijing warned it would take "resolute countermeasures" against the Biden administration if the diplomatic boycott went ahead.</p> <p>"The US should stop politicizing sports and hyping up the so-called 'diplomatic boycott' so as not to affect China-US dialogue and cooperation in important areas," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said at a news conference Monday.</p> <p>Zhao called the potential boycott "a stain on the spirit of the Olympic charter" and a "sensationalist and politically manipulative" move by US politicians.</p> <p>Last month's virtual summit between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping -- seen as some of the most critical diplomatic talks of Biden's presidency -- yielded no significant breakthroughs. However, it served as an auspicious restart to relations following steep deterioration during the final year of the Trump administration and continued hostility into the Biden administration, including when US and Chinese diplomats traded barbs during a March summit in Alaska.</p> <p>Throughout the November summit, Biden and Xi engaged engaged in a "healthy debate," according to a senior Biden administration official present for the discussions. Biden raised concerns about human rights, Chinese aggression toward Taiwan and trade issues.</p> <p>Nearly every major issue Biden is focused on -- including addressing supply chain issues, climate change, North Korea and Iran -- has a nexus to China. And the two countries, which have the world's two largest economies, remain in disputes over trade, military aggression, global infrastructure, public health and human rights.</p>

	<p>Biden has long argued that democracies can deliver more effectively than autocracies like China, and he's used the bipartisan infrastructure law to show domestically how political parties in democracies can work together.</p> <p>Xi, meanwhile, cemented his consolidation of power after the Chinese Communist Party adopted a landmark resolution elevating him in stature to that of his two most powerful predecessors -- Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. He is attempting to seek an unprecedented third term in power at the 20th Party Congress next fall.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/06 Floods: death, destruction to dairies
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/us/washington-floods-dairy-farmers.html
GIST	<p>SUMAS, Wash. — Cattle bellowed in fear, chest-deep in icy waters. An electronic grain-distribution system that feeds tens of thousands of farm animals across Washington State sat wet and useless. In the town of Lynden, the Lagerwey farm had turned into an island, shrinking by the minute against the ferocious rise of the Nooksack River.</p> <p>The cattle weren't the only ones scrambling to escape: About a third of the employees on the hardest-hit part of Doug Visser's dairy operation in nearby Sumas saw their homes ruined or destroyed. The workers, at least, lived. Dozens of cattle across the valley perished.</p> <p>Any disaster is a mixture of small things and large ones. But the floods of recent weeks in northwest Washington state, with rivers overflowing their banks after a month of record-setting rainfall, came at a deeply vulnerable moment, when the economics of the Covid era had already driven up costs, strained labor supplies and severed supply chains for everything from animal food to fuel to equipment and parts.</p> <p>An environmental crisis collided with the worsening economic challenges, each disaster making the other worse.</p> <p>"We were already kind of stumbling going into it," said Scott McKnight, the owner of Conway Feed, a century-old feed farm company about an hour north of Seattle. "Production lines were behind. We were kind of maxed out on the hours we run. People were maxed out."</p> <p>Jordan Baumgardner, who runs 260 milk cows outside of Mount Vernon, said the sound of the flood still haunts him. Milk, though usually overshadowed by Washington's stellar, nation-leading farm crop, apples, is still a \$1.2 billion industry — enough to make it the 10-largest milk producing state. Mr. Baumgardner had gone to bed thinking that the animals were safe, penned in at the highest point on the farm, even as the Skagit River, which usually flows placidly by within sight of the farm, was reaching its crest that late November day.</p> <p>But the cows, driven by instinct or panic, had done the absolute wrong thing during the night — they broke through the fence and headed downslope toward the milking shed, a place they had come to associate with shelter and food. The water was about five feet deep when Mr. Baumgardner and his brother got there around 5 a.m. The cows were packed in together, panicked and bellowing in the frigid water. He watched some give up, roll over and go down into the water to drown.</p> <p>"The cows were just screaming at me. It was, it was just total chaos. And there was nothing to deaden the sound," said Mr. Baumgardner, 31, a soft-spoken, second-generation herd manager.</p> <p>On a recent morning, he stood in the muddy shed, hands thrust deeply into the pockets of his coveralls and fighting back tears. He described how he and his brother had pushed and screamed back, trying to get the animals to move out of the shed and up to higher ground before being forced to retreat to save themselves. Forty-four of his animals did not make it out.</p>

Jason Hoekstra, the chief executive at EPL Feed, just south of the Canadian border in Sumas, said the scope of the disaster became clear to him during the night after the first river crest when the electronic system his plant depends on to measure out the precise feed formulas for each customer — unique to nearly every farm — went down. Three feet of water had surged into the electrical room.

EPL is one of the largest feed suppliers in the state, feeding animals on more than three-fourths of the farms west of the Cascade Range; the disaster was suddenly a threat to feed supplies as far as Chehalis, 200 miles south.

“The scary thing for me was really that we couldn’t get feed to the livestock. We’ve suddenly got a hundred thousand dairy cows up and down the Cascades that are suffering,” he said.

The electronics supplier he works with had none of the components needed to repair the system. Finally, one of his employees, working through the night, found a company in California that had exactly 10 of the components in stock. The plant needed all of them.

“I don’t care what it costs, get them on a plane,” Mr. Hoekstra said he told his staff.

Shuttled to a Seattle-bound Southwest Airlines flight, the parts arrived at 10 p.m. on the Friday before Thanksgiving, handed off by a delivery driver who had made it through the checkerboard of closed and flooded roads.

Economists and industry experts said the cost of the floods is hard to figure because it is still rising, even as the floodwaters recede, and the economic stresses have multiplied in several directions.

“It’s not just one factor, right?” said Lee Schulz, an associate professor of economics at Iowa State University. “We’re seeing feed prices 30 percent higher, we’re seeing certainly wages and labor costs are much higher. Fuel is much higher. You can really go across the board.”

Washington’s interim state veterinarian, Amber Itle, whose office is part of the State Department of Agriculture, grew up on a dairy farm. She said the trend toward consolidation and labor-saving technologies — smaller farms swallowed up by larger operations, greater dependency on robotics — has created majority potential choke points when one piece of a tightly wound system goes down.

“There’s a lot of benefits to consolidating and being big and being efficient and using technology, but there’s also weaknesses for food security,” Dr. Itle said.

But no one who has hitched their fortune and future to a herd of dairy cows has ever expected it to be an uneventful proposition.

“I think the guys that are in it now, they’re pretty much not doing it to make money,” said Mr. Visser, the farmer in Sumas. “They’re doing it because they love it.”

Mr. Lagerwey, whose family sold part of the farm to fund his father’s retirement from farming — dozens of homes now rising where the cows once trod — said the dairy operation represents tradition, more than anything else. “I pay the bills, and I have a little bit left over sometimes,” he said with a laugh.

Mr. McKnight at Conway Feed said his company, less affected by the floods than EPL, agreed to pick up some of EPL’s customers during the crisis to hold that company over, bridging the gap until repairs could be made, but his shop can’t really produce more than it does now.

The disruptions to feed supplies continue. Conway Feed has picked up some of EPL’s customers, but the smaller company cannot really continue to fill the orders on a long-term basis. And getting EPL’s operations back up and running has proved more complicated than the electronics shipment that arrived by air from California.

	<p>Truck drivers who normally could deliver a wheat product to the company from Canada in 90 minutes now must spend nine hours threading their way along the still-flooded roads. How long it will take to get parts to repair trucks and equipment damaged by the flood is anybody's guess.</p> <p>That's on top of the supply chain problems that already were plaguing the industry, even before the latest flooding.</p> <p>"Three or four years ago, I could get a bid on something and we could order parts and they'd be here in four to six weeks. Now if you can find somebody that gets you what you need, it might take four months," Mr. Hoekstra said.</p> <p>Animal illnesses from stress, food shortages or from hours standing in ice-cold water are likely to emerge in the coming weeks or months, Dr. Itle said. The stresses are not over, she warned farmers in a recent advisory — not for their animals, and not for them.</p> <p>"Animal caretakers will often put aside their own essential needs (food, water and sleep) to care for their animals during an emergency," she wrote. "You won't be able to care for animals if you don't take care of yourself first."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Shipping backlog hits food banks
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/shipping-backlog-leading-to-less-supply-at-food-banks-in-western-washington/281-c0ec5b99-3cfa-43ba-bd32-c3bec5b35e1d
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The supply chain backlog is hitting close to home, and it's impacting people who may need the most help this holiday season.</p> <p>Christina Wong with Northwest Harvest said local food banks are seeing the fallout in two big ways.</p> <p>"We're seeing an increased need at our doors," Wong said. "We're also seeing it impact us in terms of the cost of food that we are purchasing to distribute as well."</p> <p>Currently, the cost of nearly everything is on the rise. That means families on a tight budget can't get as much for their money as they used to, at a time when more people are seeking out help from food banks.</p> <p>For the food bank, that means more mouths to feed, compounding the issue. Northwest Harvest's dollars are also being stretched thin. The organization can't buy as much as they used to with the same amount of money, leading to a decrease in supply.</p> <p>"It's been a crunch on everyone," said Gary Newte, Director of Procurement with Northwest Harvest.</p> <p>Supply chain issues have not only increased the cost of food and goods, the cost of trucking and shipping items to western Washington is also on the rise.</p> <p>"Transportation itself has added 25 to 30 percent just in transportation to the normal cost of sourcing and procuring food," Newte said. "What has traditionally taken seven to ten business days on a purchase, has at times taken eight to ten weeks."</p> <p>There are also fewer volunteers available during the pandemic, which means less help to package bulk items, which has forced Northwest Harvest to buy prepackaged items which tend to be more expensive.</p> <p>Lastly, donations have been harder to come by.</p> <p>"Has that impacted who usually donates? Yes absolutely, um there are many grower-producers that are at times not able to meet the demands of their vendors or their retail partners, so that trickles down to us and our opportunities," Newte said.</p>

	<p>That's Northwest Harvest needs help this year more than ever.</p> <p>"I don't see it as much different than last holiday season. I imagine that we may go through potentially another holiday season with the need before there's a real, a real visible recovery," Newte said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Benefits of La Nina skew to WA than OR
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/benefits-of-la-nia-skew-more-toward-washington-than-oregon
GIST	<p>PORTLAND, Ore. — Washington and Oregon have been fighting for precipitation all year long. So, which state in the Pacific Northwest has benefitted more from the La Niña so far?</p> <p>The US Drought Monitor shows that almost all of Oregon is still under some level of drought distress right now. Almost a quarter of the state is still under the worst measure of dryness, and it's already December.</p> <p>"In La Niña years, we typically get more precipitation than normal in Western Oregon, and it's a little cooler than normal," said Oregon State Climatologist Larry O'Neill. "And usually, we can get some of our best snowpack years during La Niña."</p> <p>That, unfortunately, hasn't happened for the beaver state quite yet.</p> <p>"The storm track has basically been, instead of spreading it out all across the Northwest, it's basically been focused up in Washington and British Columbia," explained O'Neill. "So, we've missed out, and it's only by a couple hundred miles, really."</p> <p>Looking at Washington, conditions are better. More than a third of the state is now drought-free.</p> <p>O'Neill says the larger concern right now is the lack of snow in the mountains. Oregon ski resorts don't even have enough snow to open right now. Some will open with historically late opening weekends this season.</p> <p>"We really need that snow because the snowpack acts as a natural reservoir for water supply, and so basically when the rain falls in the wintertime, that snowpack will stick around to the spring and summer, and it will slowly runoff into our reservoirs," said O'Neill.</p> <p>He says Oregon typically starts building snowpack at the end of November, making the bareness of the mountains right now concerning. Between this year's heat dome and historical drought, KATU asked what this could mean for the future.</p> <p>"This is really consistent with some of what we are expecting with climate change, that we are going to have more extreme weather events," explained O'Neill.</p> <p>He says we still have time to build snowpack, but if Oregon doesn't start seeing improvements by late January, we will see this impact drought next summer.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 Mask mandate public transit thru 18 March
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/biden-administration-extends-mask-mandate-for-public-transit-through-march
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON - The Biden administration has extended a mask mandate for public transportation, airlines and rail travel through March 18, the White House announced on Thursday.</p> <p>The initial mandate was set to expire on Jan. 18, but reports of the continued spread of the omicron coronavirus variant have prompted health officials to implement new guidelines aimed and curbing the spread of the new strain.</p>

Fines for those who violate the mandates will continue to be doubled from their initial levels, the White House said, adding that a minimum fee of \$500 and fines of up to \$3,000 will be charged to repeat offenders.

Another mandate announced by the White House includes requiring all travelers to the U.S. to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test within one day of boarding their flights, regardless of nationality or vaccination status.

The tightening of testing for those entering the country will begin next week and is down from the current three days for those who have been vaccinated.

The new directive is part of President Joe Biden's new winter plan for combating COVID-19 and the new omicron variant, which also includes a [requirement for private insurers to cover the cost of at-home COVID-19 tests](#) and paid time off for federal employees to get a booster dose.

"The actions I'm announcing are ones that all Americans can rally behind and should unite us in the fight against COVID-19 and they come from a position of strength," Biden said in remarks from the National Institutes of Health outside Washington. "We are better positioned than we were a year ago to fight COVID-19."

In updating its travel options, the White House has shelved tougher options, like requiring post-arrival testing or requiring quarantines upon arrival in the U.S. It has not yet moved to require domestic U.S. travelers to be vaccinated or get tested, as officials believe such a requirement would be immediately mired in litigation.

"We base our decisions on the advice of the health and medical experts, what's going to be most effective and what we can implement," press secretary Jen Psaki said earlier Thursday. "What's most implementable, so we look at a range of factors as we make decisions about what steps we can put in place."

Much remains unknown about the omicron variant, including whether it is more contagious, whether it makes people more seriously ill and whether it can thwart the vaccines.

Still, the Biden administration has come to view widespread adoption of booster shots as its most effective tool for combating COVID-19 this winter amid its ongoing spread. Medical experts say boosters provide enhanced and more enduring protection against COVID-19, including new variants.

About 100 million Americans are eligible for boosters under current U.S. policy, with more becoming eligible every day. Convincing those who have already been vaccinated to get another dose, officials believe, will be far easier than vaccinating the roughly 43 million adult Americans who haven't gotten a shot despite widespread public pressure campaigns to roll up their sleeves.

And while Biden's vaccination-or-testing requirement for workers at larger employers [has been held up by legal challenges](#), the president on Thursday will renew his call for businesses to move ahead and impose their own mandates on workers so they can stay open without outbreaks.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 Ukraine army day vow: fight off Russia
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-marks-army-day-with-us-hardware-vow-fight-off-russia-2021-12-06/
GIST	KYIV, Dec 6 (Reuters) - President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said Ukraine's armed forces were capable of fighting off any attack from Russia as the country marked its national army day on Monday with a display of U.S. armoured vehicles and patrol boats.

U.S. President Joe Biden has pledged his "unwavering support" to Ukraine in its standoff with Moscow and will hold talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday to try to defuse the crisis.

Ukraine has accused Russia of massing tens of thousands of troops near its border in preparation for a possible large scale military offensive, raising the prospect of open war between the two neighbours.

"The servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine continue to fulfil their most important mission - to defend the freedom and sovereignty of the state from the Russian aggressor," Zelenskiy said in a statement.

"The Ukrainian army ... is confident in its strength and able to thwart any conquest plans of the enemy," he said.

Russia has dismissed talk of a new assault on Ukraine as false and inflammatory but told the West not to cross its "red lines" and to halt the eastward expansion of the NATO alliance.

Zelenskiy will travel east to Kharkiv, a traditional centre for Ukrainian weapons manufacturing, to mark a delivery of tanks, armoured personal carriers and armoured vehicles made in the city's factories.

He will also visit the Donetsk region, where Ukraine's army has fought Russian-backed forces in a simmering conflict that Kyiv says has killed 14,000 people since 2014.

Several cities across Ukraine are marking the 30th anniversary of the creation of an independent military after winning independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Kyiv, Lviv and the southern port city of Odessa will display U.S.-made Humvees. In Odessa, there will also be a ceremony to hand over two recently delivered U.S. Coast Guard patrol boats intended to bolster Ukraine's navy.

Ukraine has urged NATO to accelerate its entry into the military alliance and said Moscow had no right to veto. NATO's leadership has been supportive but said Ukraine must carry out defence reforms and tackle corruption first.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 US embassy: Japan police racial profiling
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-embassy-tokyo-warns-suspected-racial-profiling-by-japanese-police-2021-12-06/
GIST	<p>TOKYO, Dec 6 (Reuters) - The United States Embassy in Tokyo on Monday warned in a tweet of incidents of suspected racial profiling of non-Japanese by Japanese police.</p> <p>Japan is a mostly ethnically homogeneous country where some people equate more immigrants with a rise in crime, although foreign labour is increasingly needed to make up for a declining and ageing population.</p> <p>"The U.S. Embassy has received reports of foreigners stopped and searched by Japanese police in suspected racial profiling incidents. Several were detained, questioned, and searched," the tweet said.</p> <p>"U.S. citizens should carry proof of immigration and request consular notification if detained."</p> <p>The tweet is an unusual move from the United States, a key Japanese ally.</p> <p>A U.S. Embassy spokesperson said the embassy had nothing further to add to the tweet, and the National Police Agency could not immediately comment.</p>

	<p>Asked about the U.S. embassy warning, top government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno said only that police question suspicious individuals based on various factors but that those decisions are not based on a person's ethnicity or nationality.</p> <p>A week ago, Japan closed its borders to all non-resident foreigners in one of the strongest global measures taken to prevent the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Naomi Kawahara, founder of advocacy group Japan for Black Lives, said racial profiling by Japanese police was nothing new, particularly for foreigners or mixed-race Japanese people of colour.</p> <p>"I had a friend who was questioned by police more than 30 times in the six years that he lived here," she told Reuters of her African-American friend, who left Japan a few years ago.</p> <p>"Sometimes it was in front of his house, as he was about to walk his dog."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Surgeon Gen. 'more vigilant'; not panic
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/murthy-omicron-masks-vaccines/2021/12/05/id/1047391/
GIST	<p>The fast spread to the United States of the new COVID19 omicron variant is a reason to be "more vigilant" but "not panic," U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said Sunday.</p> <p>In an interview on "Fox News Sunday," Murthy said "we do know that the measures we take to protect ourselves from the spread of COVID, those work. And they will work" against omicron as well.</p> <p>"I am concerned about the possibility that this is going to spread more easily than other variants you've seen to date and we have to get more data to understand the exact extent of that," he said. "But I do think it is a reason for us to not panic, but be more vigilant, and recognize that the precautions we've been about for the last year or so are all the more important now than ever."</p> <p>"We have the delta variant that is causing close to 100,000 cases a day and as winter approaches and people go indoors, it's possible those numbers may go up unless we take the precautions that are necessary like getting vaccinated wearing those masks to make this is a cause for being even more vigilant, but not for panic," he emphasized.</p> <p>We're not back in 2020 in terms of handling COVID, Murthy said.</p> <p>"I think that the measures [President Joe Biden] announced are going to help us for the winter," he said. "I want to make sure that people understand this very clearly. We are not back in March 2020 despite the prospect of a new variant on the horizon and the fact that we found cases here. We have more tools and more knowledge to protect ourselves.</p> <p>"The holidays this year will be and have been very different than the holidays and 2020," he said. "I've been able to take my kids trick-or-treating for Halloween. I got together with family for Thanksgiving. Millions of Americans did the same. We can gather safely from holidays and these measures will help us do the same," he said referring to masks at indoor gatherings and vaccines.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/06 China warns US over Olympics boycott
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/beijing-us-olympics-boycott/2021/12/06/id/1047439/
GIST	<p>China on Monday threatened to take "firm countermeasures" if the U.S. proceeds with a diplomatic boycott of February's Beijing Winter Olympic Games.</p> <p>Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian accused U.S. politicians of grandstanding over the issue of not sending dignitaries to attend the events that China hopes will showcase its economic development and technological prowess.</p>

Speaking to reporters at a daily briefing, Zhao said such a move would be an “outright political provocation,” but gave no details on how China would retaliate.

U.S. President Joe Biden has said he is considering a boycott, under which American athletes would still compete, and an announcement is expected this week. Supporters of such a step cite China’s poor record on human rights as justification, saying China is using the games to whitewash its ill treatment of civil rights activists, political dissidents and ethnic minorities.

“Without being invited, American politicians keep hyping the so-called diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympic, which is purely wishful thinking and grandstanding,” Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing.

“If the U.S. side is bent on going its own way, China will take firm countermeasures,” Zhao said.

The dispatching of high-level delegations to each Olympics has long been a tradition among the U.S. and other leading nations — then-president George W. Bush attended the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Summer Games. First lady Jill Biden led the American contingent to the Summer Olympics in Tokyo this year and second gentleman Doug Emhoff led a delegation to the Paralympic Games.

The possibility of a diplomatic boycott comes as the U.S. attempts to stabilize turbulent relations with Beijing, even as it maintains a tough approach toward trade frictions and conflicts over China's actions on Taiwan, human rights, Hong Kong and the South China Sea.

Beijing has mounted a stiff response to all U.S. criticisms, denouncing them as interference in its internal affairs and slapping visa bans on American politicians it regards as anti-China.

It wasn't clear who the U.S. might have sent to Beijing for the games and Zhao's comments appeared to indicate that China has not extended any invitations.

Australia, whose ties with China have nosedived over a range of disputes, has also raised the possibility of a diplomatic boycott.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 Taiwan firms ties with Europe
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-taiwan-slovakia-68d1482634789a4b8e19a702c924b652
GIST	<p>TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Senior officials from the Slovak Republic are in Taiwan for talks on deepening ties with the island in the highest-level visit by the EU-member country since it opened a representative office in Taiwan in 2003.</p> <p>The visit by the delegation, which began Sunday, follows a mission last month by members of the European Parliament to the self-ruled island, which is also claimed by China.</p> <p>It comes amid growing support for the island democracy, which China says is territory to be annexed by force if necessary.</p> <p>“The fact that we are here today despite the pandemic is because we are determined and committed to working with Taiwan,” said Lucia Kišš, director general for Economic and Development Cooperation at Slovakia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.</p> <p>According to Taiwan’s Central News Agency, she called Taiwan “one of the most important investors” for the country.</p>

Taiwan has formal diplomatic ties with 15 nations. Countries that maintain those relations face the ire of China's leaders, who insist that all countries adhere to a "one-China" policy formally recognizing only Beijing.

The EU Parliament passed a resolution on Taiwan issues in October, noting tensions in the South China Sea.

Lithuania, another EU member, accepted Taiwan's request in July to open a representative office in its capital city that will act as a de facto embassy. It has also donated hundreds of thousands of vaccines to the island this year, provoking China's displeasure.

In August, China withdrew its ambassador to Lithuania in protest and expelled Lithuania's ambassador from Beijing.

The head of Taiwan's National Development Council, Kung Ming-hsin, who visited Slovakia in October, said Taiwan had investments worth more than \$564 million (500 million euros) in the country, creating 3,000 jobs there.

Kung's visit yielded seven agreements on strengthening cooperation on trade and technology.

Two-way trade between Taiwan and Slovakia totaled \$250 million in the first nine months of 2021, according to Taiwanese government data, up 18.4% from the same period a year earlier.

Kung also noted that Slovakia donated 160,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines in September, in an expression of friendship. Taiwan had donated hundreds of thousands of face masks to Slovakia during the beginning of the pandemic.

"I believe such mutual benefits, exchanges and cooperation coincides with what President Tsai Ing-wen calls a virtuous cycle," he said. "We will expand this cycle to other fields including economic and trade cooperation."

The Slovakian delegation is headed by its deputy economy minister, Karol Galek and other officials and business representatives.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 Europe doubles-down on mandates
SOURCE	https://www.axios.com/america-europe-pandemic-coronavirus-vaccines-a41663cf-decf-4256-a739-898eb318edff.html
GIST	<p>European countries are doubling down on pressure campaigns to get people vaccinated just as Republicans continue to wage war — often successfully — against vaccine mandates in the U.S.</p> <p>Why it matters: The starkly different approaches create a sharp contrast between the regions' approaches to vaccination, even as the Omicron variant rapidly spreads around the world.</p> <p>Driving the news: President Biden's federal vaccine mandates are getting pummeled in court.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The federal vaccine mandate for health care workers was paused this week by a federal judge in Louisiana. A separate federal mandate that applies to all employees of businesses with more than 100 workers is also paused pending court review.• Other courts have suspended the administration's mandates for health care workers and federal contractors in certain states. <p>By the numbers: Only 60% of the U.S. population is fully vaccinated, per the CDC.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When implemented, vaccine mandates often drive up vaccination rates.

The other side: Germany announced this week that unvaccinated people will not be allowed in nonessential shops or cultural and recreational venues, [AP reports](#).

- France, Italy and Austria have also announced that unvaccinated people will be largely prohibited from visiting bars, restaurants and arts, sports and entertainment venues, [the Wall Street Journal reports](#).
- In France, the unvaccinated must present a negative test — which the government no longer subsidizes — taken within the previous three days to access such venues.
- Other countries have taken more targeted approaches. In Greece, only people older than 60 are required to be vaccinated against COVID, per the WSJ.

The bottom line: Vaccines work very well at keeping people alive even if they do become infected with the coronavirus, and many experts expect them to remain effective against severe disease even with Omicron.

- That makes getting vaccination rates up imperative for public health, but only one of the world's most developed regions appears committed to doing that by using sticks when carrots have failed.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 China 'zero-Covid' goal achievable?
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/06/china/china-covid-inner-mongolia-mic-intl-hnk/index.html
GIST	<p>Hong Kong (CNN)As the world grapples with the new Omicron coronavirus variant, China is determined as ever to eliminate Covid-19 within its borders -- but it hasn't been able to achieve that ambitious goal for the past seven weeks.</p> <p>Since October 17, China has reported at least one locally transmitted case everyday, as local outbreaks continue to flare up one after another with increasingly short intermissions.</p> <p>While its caseload pales in comparison with those of many countries -- including the United States, which is averaging more than 100,000 new cases a day -- the unceasing flareups underscore the growing challenge China faces to keep infections at zero.</p> <p>For more than a year, China has been highly efficient in curbing local outbreaks with mass testing, snap lockdowns, vigilant surveillance and extensive quarantines -- all the while keeping the border tightly sealed.</p> <p>As proof of the success of these measures, not a single Covid-related death has been reported in the country since late January.</p> <p>More recently, however, authorities have resorted to ever more stringent measures, quarantining not only residents who have been in direct contact with an infected person, but also secondary contacts and people who happen to be in the same general area at about the same time.</p> <p>In the past seven weeks, nearly 10,000 tourists were trapped in Inner Mongolia for a week after a lockdown was imposed over dozens of cases; Shanghai Disneyland was shut down over a single confirmed case known to have visited the park; high-speed trains were stopped midway through their journeys to Beijing when close contacts of confirmed cases were found among crew members; and some local Covid prevention workers even killed pets during home disinfection while their owners were away in quarantine.</p> <p>These strict measures eventually succeeded in bringing infections in those specific localities down to zero -- but not for long.</p> <p>Over the past week, more than 300 cases have been reported in Inner Mongolia, this time in Manzhouli, a crucial port of entry bordering Russia. The local government imposed a snap lockdown, and the city is currently rolling out a 9th round of mass testing for its more than 150,000 residents -- but that still isn't quick enough in the eyes of higher authorities.</p>

Over the weekend, the city fired two officials for their "slow and weak response" to the outbreak -- one for delaying the transfer and quarantine of more than 100 close contacts, and the other for his poor management of quarantine hotels, state media reported. Another four officials were criticized for their lackluster performances.

Local officials across China have been fired or punished for failing to contain Covid flare-ups. The goal to keep infections at zero has placed tremendous pressure on local authorities -- often sending them into overdrive in imposing unnecessarily draconian measures, sometimes at the disproportionate expense of disruption of daily lives.

While mainstream Chinese public opinion still appears to support the government's zero-Covid policy, excessive local measures have sparked discontent and criticism in some regions, such as the southwestern border town of Ruili and the Ili prefecture in Xinjiang.

In addition to Inner Mongolia, cases have been detected over the past week in the country's largest cities, from Beijing and Shanghai to Guangzhou. The provinces of Heilongjiang, Shaanxi, Hebei and Yunnan also reported cases.

China remains [one of the last countries](#) attempting to maintain zero-Covid, as the rest of the world learns to live with the virus. But the arrival of the Omicron variant has sent nations in a scramble to impose travel restrictions -- and if anything only strengthened China's intent to keep its borders tightly sealed. (So far China has yet to detect Omicron.)

A [recent study](#) by mathematicians at the country's prestigious Peking University has found that China could face more than 630,000 Covid-19 infections a day if it dropped its zero-tolerance policies by lifting travel curbs -- which would "almost certainly induce an unaffordable burden on the medical system," the report said.

It concluded that China should not give up zero-Covid for the time being, until there are "more efficient vaccinations or more specific treatment, preferably the combination of both."

Over the weekend, Zhong Nanshan, a top Chinese respiratory disease expert and government adviser, proposed two prerequisites for the lifting of the zero-tolerance approach: one is for the fatality rate of Covid-19 to drop to around 0.1%, and the other is for the basic reproduction number of Covid to drop between 1 and 1.5, meaning every infected person will spread the virus to an average of 1 to 1.5 people in a susceptible population.

In August, researchers who studied a Delta variant outbreak in Guangdong province [estimated Delta's basic reproduction number to be 6.4](#) -- which is much higher than the coronavirus variant first detected in Wuhan. [The World Health Organization says](#) it is not yet clear whether the new Omicron variant is more transmissible than Delta.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 Omicron spread: concern for mental health
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/06/omicron-mental-health-america-covid-pandemic
GIST	<p>Sarah Isaacs, a therapist in Raleigh, North Carolina, sees mostly clients between the ages of 22 and 30, many of whom missed out on the usual dating and networking because of the Covid pandemic.</p> <p>"They literally haven't been able to do anything for two years," said Isaacs, who specializes in working with people with eating disorders and people who identify as LGBTQ+.</p> <p>They are just some of the people in the United States whose mental health has suffered during the pandemic. A Gallup poll conducted in November found that, like last year, only 34% of Americans describe their mental health as "excellent". Those are the lowest levels in two decades.</p>

Even though many people in the United States are now vaccinated against the virus and able to engage in something like a pre-pandemic lifestyle, the country's population continues to suffer from anxiety and depression.

And now there are fresh worries about the Omicron variant and the impact it could have on public life this winter. The new variant – which, early reports suggest, could be more contagious than previous strains – is already spreading in the US, triggering concern. If Omicron does lead to another Covid-19 surge, the impact on mental health will be serious.

“Despite vaccinations, we still see that people are not back to pre-pandemic levels of wellbeing,” said Silvia Saccardo, a social scientist and co-author of a recent [study](#) on college students at the University of Pittsburgh students. “And they are not back to pre-pandemic levels of physical activity, which could have consequences as well, and this is quite worrisome, because if lifestyle habits and wellbeing don't naturally rebound, it's important to think about what to do, about interventions to help them.”

Psychologists and others who study mental health attribute the high rates of anxiety and depression to continued worries about the virus, and lingering trauma from the worst parts of the pandemic.

That is not unusual, said Sharon Hoover, co-director of the University of Maryland-based National Center for School Mental Health. For example, more than 18 months after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, 15% of youths exposed to the natural disaster continued to suffer from serious emotional disturbances, such as anxiety disorders, compared with a 4.2% national average, according to a [study](#) in the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Like the twentysomethings Isaacs has seen, children and teens have also missed out on significant life events, Hoover said, and “that doesn't get remedied overnight by reintroducing those things”.

“Many children and adolescents don't yet have the coping mechanisms that they might need, and they are in some respects at the mercy of adults who are there to take care of them,” said Hoover. “It's a grave mistake for people to say, ‘Our kids are going to be OK, it's just the adults who are going to suffer.’”

The same concerns about mental health continue to linger on college campuses. Before the pandemic, in fall 2019, one-third of college students across the country reported that they were struggling with anxiety and a quarter reported depression, according to an American College Health Association [report](#). A survey [conducted](#) by the organization in spring 2021 found that one in four students had screened positive for suicidal thoughts.

“If there are still concerns about a variant or who knows what may come down the road, that poses a lot of anticipatory anxiety,” said John Dunkle, a former director of counseling services at Northwestern University who is now a senior director with the non-profit Jed Foundation, a suicide prevention organization.

To combat what some public health groups have [declared](#) a national mental health emergency, schools must build up coping skills for adolescents in classrooms rather “than waiting for kids to get routed to mental health providers that they may not see for six months” in part due to a workforce shortage, said Hoover.

“We got kids back to school to improve their learning loss in the context of Covid, but we have to also be putting social and emotional supports in the school settings,” said Hoover.

While there is a shortage of mental health professionals in the United States, Dunkle said focusing on the number of providers at a counseling center should just be one consideration. Schools must also educate other staff on how to respond to students' mental health needs and help students navigate insurance issues, he said.

	<p>Despite worries about students’ mental health struggles, Dunkle sees causes for optimism. In conjunction with Dunkle’s organization, Ithaca College recently established a “Stop and Breathe week”, aimed at helping “students cope with the stress of preparing for final exams”.</p> <p>After two students at Saint Louis University died by suicide in September, the school canceled classes for a day to help students focus on mental health.</p> <p>“That’s a good sign, where we say to students in the community, ‘Let’s stop and think about our mental health and balance,’” said Dunkle. Ideally, they would take such steps “proactively, not necessarily in the aftermath of a tragedy”.</p> <p>Isaacs, the North Carolina therapist, also can take positives from recent reports on mental health in the United States. She and the other provider in her practice have a two-month waiting list of people seeking appointments, in part because therapy has become more normative, she said.</p> <p>“I think the fact that people are seeking therapy in droves is a good thing,” said Isaacs. “It has been a grim two years, but I think everybody having it together at the same time has made people feel like they aren’t so alone.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/05 China military base Africa Atlantic coast?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-seeks-first-military-base-on-africas-atlantic-coast-u-s-intelligence-finds-11638726327?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>BATA, Equatorial Guinea—Classified American intelligence reports suggest China intends to establish its first permanent military presence on the Atlantic Ocean in the tiny Central African country of Equatorial Guinea, according to U.S. officials.</p> <p>The officials declined to describe details of the secret intelligence findings. But they said the reports raise the prospect that Chinese warships would be able to rearm and refit opposite the East Coast of the U.S.—a threat that is setting off alarm bells at the White House and Pentagon.</p> <p>Principal deputy U.S. national security adviser Jon Finan visited Equatorial Guinea in October on a mission to persuade President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo and his son and heir apparent, Vice President Teodoro “Teodorin” Nguema Obiang Mangue, to reject China’s overtures.</p> <p>“As part of our diplomacy to address maritime-security issues, we have made clear to Equatorial Guinea that certain potential steps involving [Chinese] activity there would raise national-security concerns,” said a senior Biden administration official.</p> <p>The great-power skirmishing over a country that rarely draws outside attention reflects the rising tensions between Washington and Beijing. The two countries are sparring over the status of Taiwan, China’s testing of a hypersonic missile, the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic and other issues.</p> <p>World-wide, the U.S. finds itself maneuvering to try to block China from projecting its military power from new overseas bases, from Cambodia to the United Arab Emirates.</p> <p>In Equatorial Guinea, the Chinese likely have an eye on Bata, according to a U.S. official. Bata already has a Chinese-built deep-water commercial port on the Gulf of Guinea, and excellent highways link the city to Gabon and the interior of Central Africa.</p> <p>The “most significant threat” from China would be “a militarily useful naval facility on the Atlantic coast of Africa,” Gen. Stephen Townsend, commander of U.S. Africa Command, testified in the Senate in April. “By militarily useful I mean something more than a place that they can make port calls and get gas and groceries. I’m talking about a port where they can rearm with munitions and repair naval vessels.”</p>

Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony with a population of 1.4 million, secured independence in 1968. The capital, Malabo, is on the island of Bioko, while Bata is the largest city on the mainland section of the country, which is wedged between Gabon and Cameroon.

Mr. Obiang has ruled the country since 1979. The discovery of huge offshore gas and oil reserves in 1996 allegedly allowed members of his family to spend lavishly on exotic cars, mansions and other luxuries, according to U.S. Senate and Justice Department investigations.

Contacted by The Wall Street Journal, Gabriel Mbagha Obiang Lima, Equatorial Guinea's oil minister and one of the president's sons, requested that questions about his country's relationship with China and allegations of corruption in his family be submitted in writing. He didn't respond to those questions. Equatorial Guinea's ambassador in Washington didn't respond to multiple interview requests.

U.S. intelligence agencies began picking up indications of China's military intentions in Equatorial Guinea in 2019. During the closing days of the Trump administration, a senior Pentagon official visited the country, but the approach apparently left the Obiangs uncertain about how seriously the U.S. took China's military aspirations.

The Biden White House has sought to deliver a sharper message: It would be shortsighted of Equatorial Guinea to insert itself between the front lines of U.S.-China global competition.

At the same time, the U.S. has taken steps to warm relations. In March, the U.S. offered aid after an apparently accidental ammunition explosion leveled an army base near Bata, [killing at least 100 people](#).

The same month, Equatorial Guinean troops participated in U.S.-led naval exercises in the Gulf of Guinea. In August, an American Navy ship anchored off the Bata port, and the captain invited local officials and naval personnel aboard to observe firefighter training.

The White House doesn't know whether its diplomatic outreach will have the desired effect and believes it will require a persistent, long-term effort to fend off a Chinese naval presence.

At the same time, the U.S. wants to convey a nuanced message: Washington isn't asking Equatorial Guinea to abandon its extensive ties with China, but just to keep relations within bounds the U.S. considers unthreatening.

The U.S. concern "is that the Chinese would develop a naval base in Equatorial Guinea, which would then give them naval presence on the Atlantic," Maj. Gen. Andrew Rohling, commander of the U.S. Army Southern European Task Force—Africa, said in a June interview.

Following the visit by Mr. Finer, Mr. Obiang Mangué, the president's son and de facto head of Equatorial Guinea's security forces, announced that the White House had named him "the No. 1 interlocutor in relations between our two countries."

He tweeted a thank-you video showing the protocol gift he received from Mr. Finer's delegation, a silver platter engraved with the U.S. presidential seal. A few days later, Mr. Obiang Mangué and the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Malabo discussed proposals raised during Mr. Finer's visit.

Shortly afterward, however, Mr. Obiang, the president, spoke by phone with Chinese President Xi Jinping, after which Beijing put out a statement highlighting that "Equatorial Guinea has always regarded China as its most important strategic partner."

China helps train and arm the Equatorial Guinean police.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs didn't respond to a written request for comment on any basing plans in Equatorial Guinea or elsewhere on Africa's Atlantic coast.

Beijing set up its first overseas military base in 2017 in Djibouti, on the opposite side of the continent. The former French colony looks onto the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a strategic chokepoint for shipping traffic transiting the Suez Canal. The Chinese facility has a pier capable of docking an aircraft carrier and nuclear submarines, according to U.S. Africa Command.

The base is 6 miles from the largest American base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier, home to 4,500 U.S. troops.

“China doesn’t just build a military base like the U.S.,” said Paul Nantulya, research associate at the Pentagon-funded Africa Center for Strategic Studies. “The Chinese model is very, very different. It combines civilian as well as security elements.”

Chinese state-owned companies have built 100 commercial ports around Africa in the past two decades, according to Chinese government data.

This spring, U.S. intelligence officials uncovered what they said was construction on a secret military base at a Chinese-run commercial port in the United Arab Emirates. The Biden administration persuaded Emirati authorities to halt construction, at least temporarily.

American diplomats in Mauritania, along Africa’s northwest coast, have advised local authorities to rebuff any effort by Beijing to use a Chinese-built port for military purposes, according to a U.S. official.

In a report to Congress this year, the Pentagon said China “has likely considered” African bases in Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania and Angola.

There are no visible signs of major construction at the Bata port, which was upgraded by China Road & Bridge Co., a state-owned enterprise, between 2009 and 2014.

The U.S. knows it faces challenges in its bid for Equatorial Guinea’s favor, seeking help from a country it has pointedly criticized.

The State Department has accused the Obiang regime of extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture and other abuses.

A U.S. Senate committee issued a report in 2004 criticizing Washington-based Riggs Bank for turning “a blind eye to evidence suggesting the bank was handling the proceeds of foreign corruption” in accepting hundreds of millions of dollars in deposits controlled by Mr. Obiang, his wife and other relatives.

The bank said it regretted that it “did not more swiftly and more thoroughly complete the work necessary to fully meet the expectations of our regulators.” PNC Financial Services Group Inc. acquired Riggs the following year.

Separately, the U.S. Justice Department pursued the allegedly ill-gotten gains of the president’s son Mr. Obiang Mangué.

In 2011, Mr. Obiang Mangué called the U.S. ambassador in Malabo asking for help clearing his name against what he said were unfair allegations surfacing in the press. “I have never stolen money from our country’s treasury,” he told the ambassador, according to a State Department cable entered into court records. He told the ambassador he had earned his riches by winning legitimate government contracts during the country’s oil-fueled infrastructure boom.

In a series of civil cases, however, U.S. government lawyers accused Mr. Obiang Mangué of amassing a fortune of more than \$300 million “through corruption and money laundering” while earning less than \$100,000 a year as minister of agriculture and forestry. In a 2014 settlement, Mr. Obiang Mangué surrendered to the federal government proceeds from a Malibu mansion, a Ferrari and other assets.

	<p>This fall, the Justice Department announced that it would steer \$26.6 million of the surrendered assets back to Equatorial Guinea in the form of Covid-19 vaccines and other medical aid, bypassing the government.</p> <p>The Equatorial Guinean Foreign Ministry responded with a statement condemning the U.S. announcement as a “misrepresentation” of the facts. In a series of tweets, Mr. Obiang Mangué said it had been his desire to use the funds for medicine and that the U.S. government hadn’t forced him to do so.</p> <p>Though often at odds with the Obiang regime, the U.S. isn’t without leverage.</p> <p>Equatorial Guinea relies on American oil companies to extract offshore resources that have made the country the richest on the sub-Saharan mainland, as measured by per capita annual gross domestic product.</p> <p>And the State Department recently raised Equatorial Guinea’s ranking in the annual assessment of how diligently countries combat human trafficking. The upgrade could allow the Biden administration to offer maritime-security assistance to help win Equatorial Guinea’s cooperation.</p> <p>The country faces a growing threat from pirates and illegal fishing in its waters on the Gulf of Guinea.</p> <p>“We think there is a fair amount we could do together on the maritime-security side that would be in our interest and of interest to them,” said the senior administration official.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Federal Way to ramp up police hiring
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3262853/federal-way-hire-officers/
GIST	<p>After a recent spike in violence in South King County, Federal Way Mayor Jim Farrell put out a call to his fellow mayors that something has to be done.</p> <p>Farrell was quick to note on Seattle’s Morning News that when he reached out to his fellow mayors, several of them — including the mayors of Auburn and Kent — had already decided to do this exact idea.</p> <p>“I think it’s an idea whose time has come. I wouldn’t say it was necessarily my idea,” Farrell said. “I think that all the mayors in South King County, and city administrators and police chiefs, are ready to work together, to lock up arms.”</p> <p>This level of violence, Farrell said, has reached an “unacceptable level.”</p> <p>Speaking from Federal Way’s perspective, the mayor says they need to find multi-prong strategies to address this rise in violence and really work with the neighboring communities.</p> <p>“If you think about it, all of South King County — Kent, Auburn, Renton, Tukwila, Des Moines, and SeaTac — we’re well over two-thirds of a million people. That’s a big collective voice and we need to have those voices heard,” he said.</p> <p>As far as who’s committing the violence, Farrell says there has been a rise in violence with guns.</p> <p>“We need to make sure that we get the guns out of the hands of the people committing these crimes, and that’s going to really involve some intelligence sharing by our police departments,” he said. “But I also think that we’ve got a situation in which we’ve got a record, all-time high 10 homicides in the city of Federal Way this year. Half of those — five out of 10 — we believe, and we have evidence to suggest, that they are ... drug-related, meaning that there’s some sort of drug deal gone bad.”</p> <p>“We’ve got a situation in the state of Washington right now where we’ve got de facto legalization of hard drugs like cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, fentanyl, based on this new structure that was passed in light of the [state] Supreme Court decision,” he added.</p>

But aside from changes needed at the county executive level or the state level even, what can Farrell, as the mayor of Federal Way, do to take action?

He started his reply by saying he's looking forward to meeting with other South King County mayors, hearing their suggestions, and bringing his own to the table. In Federal Way, he says there are a number of changes happening already.

"Number one, we were already at an all-time high of 137 officers budgeted. We've been filling the vacancies to get us to 137. But I just asked for an received the approval from our city council to add 13 new officers to the city of Federal Way to get us to 150, a historic high," Farrell said. "Then what we've done is asked for authorization for overtime and extra patrols, what we call ProAct units, which are making sure that you show up at problem areas before the things occur."

"That's a big step, as well as extra patrols, overtime patrols on Pacific Highway 320 and in what we have determined to be high-impact areas," he added.

Looking at Seattle where police officers continue to leave, KIRO Radio asked if Farrell thinks they'll be able to hire more officers to get up to 150.

Farrell says absolutely. He noted that part of recruiting people involves making sure you have the pay and benefits and other incentives, and he says those are included in the budget proposal.

"There's really two ways you can recruit officers," he explained. "One is by laterals, from other law enforcement agencies where they've already gone through the training. And the other is brand-new officers, younger folks where you bring them in and they've got to go through the academy."

"By bringing in new officers — obviously you only have a certain number of space in each academy — so we need to make sure that we've got sufficient funding for academy classes for the entire state," Farrell said. "But we also need a mix of laterals as well, and that sort of mix institutionally at the city is very important."

Federal Way will add those officers, though, Farrell assured.

"Probably about two or three per month until we get to that number," he says, "probably by mid-next year."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 Omicron outpaced public health response
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/nyregion/nyc-anime-convention-omicron-cases.html
GIST	<p>They wore fluorescent wigs and capes with gold tassels. They arrived in knee-high white platform boots, and with feathered wings affixed to their backs. Dressed like their favorite characters, or just wearing street clothes, they packed into Manhattan's main convention hall — some 53,000 of them — over three days in November to celebrate their love of Japanese animation shows known as anime.</p> <p>In the crowd was Peter McGinn, a 30-year-old health care analyst in town from Minneapolis. He attended discussion panels, chatted with strangers about his anime podcast and, at night, sang karaoke with friends. After flying home, he learned that one friend from the convention — an anime fan from North Carolina — had just tested positive for the coronavirus. In the days to come, many more of his friends from the convention would test positive, as well. Coughing and feeling tired, Mr. McGinn also took a test. He had the virus, too.</p> <p>That was Nov. 23, a day before most scientists had even heard of the new variant that was tearing across southern Africa. The World Health Organization had not yet even given the variant a name — Omicron. But it was already present in the United States, undetected.</p>

That became apparent this past week, when health authorities in Minnesota examined the virus samples in a batch of recent tests. One of them — from Mr. McGinn — showed Omicron’s telltale mutations.

His infection, which was announced by the Minnesota health authorities on Dec. 2, is the first known instance of Omicron spreading within the United States. “I’m essentially patient zero,” he said in an interview from Minneapolis on Friday, though he wonders how he contracted it. “It’s still a mystery.”

He may never know. The announcement came more than 10 days after the anime convention ended, leaving health authorities far behind, even before they realized the race against Omicron had begun.

New York City health officials have sent tens of thousands of emails and text messages to the convention attendees, urging them to get tested. But so far the authorities have yet to confirm any transmission of Omicron at the Anime NYC convention, which was held Nov. 19-21.

It is possible that the convention contributed little to Omicron’s spread. But it appears more likely that the virus is once again outpacing a public health response that is simply unable to keep up. (On Saturday, [Connecticut officials said](#) that a man in his 60s from their state fell sick with the Omicron variant in late November, days after a family member had returned from attending the anime convention.)

In the nearly two years since the novel coronavirus first began circulating in this country, the United States has built enough capacity [to test more people](#) than any other country. It is now sequencing [some 14 percent of positive P.C.R. tests](#), searching for mutations and identifying variants.

Some municipalities, like New York City, and states, like Massachusetts, built out large-scale contact tracing organizations. Most of the U.S. population — 60 percent — is [vaccinated](#). Just a few weeks ago, before Omicron was identified, there was widespread hope that the pandemic, in this country at least, was easing. People felt safe as they flashed their proof of vaccination — at least one dose was required for entry, consistent with the city’s rules — and streamed into the Javits Center for the convention.

But amid tens of thousands of new Delta infections in the United States each day, Omicron’s landfall and spread are easily hidden. Many coronavirus infections are asymptomatic or have only minor symptoms, slipping under the radar.

Indeed, it remains unclear if the anime convention was a super spreader event. “We haven’t found evidence of widespread transmission at the convention,” Adam Shrier, a spokesman for New York City’s contact tracing program, Test and Trace Corps, wrote in an email.

It is also unclear whether Mr. McGinn was infected at the convention or by a fellow attendee. But he spent successive days at the convention, and evenings with other convention goers.

Of the roughly 30 people he recalls socializing with in New York City, about half have since tested positive for the coronavirus, Mr. McGinn said. However, none of the states where they live have announced whether those people also had the Omicron variant.

Much remains unknown about Omicron, including how deadly it is or the degree of protection that Covid vaccines provide against it. But epidemiologists are once again talking about flattening the curve, through mask wearing and more cautious behavior. And they are urging action now, to avoid a repeat of the mistakes made in March 2020, when New York officials were [slow to understand just how quickly the virus was spreading](#) throughout the city.

Over the past four days, New York’s genome sequencing program has detected seven Omicron cases among residents in New York City, although health authorities have provided little information about the cases. “All of these cases are believed to be unrelated to the recent Anime NYC convention at the Javits Center,” the governor’s office said in a news release on Saturday morning.

New York's surveillance program for screening variants is relatively robust, but it comes with a lag, as do similar programs elsewhere. It typically takes between four and eight days from the time a sample is swabbed to identify which variant caused the infection. That means any alarming increase in new cases that is noticed today may already be a week old.

Dr. Jay Varma, an epidemiologist who helped guide New York City's pandemic response as a City Hall adviser, said in an interview that he believed the city should distribute N95 masks to households [in the neighborhoods](#) that were hardest hit by Covid-19 last year and start opening more testing sites in response to Omicron. And he said it was time to tighten New York City's vaccination requirement for indoor venues like restaurants and bars. Rather than requiring only one dose, he suggested that it was time to require three.

"We don't know how effective that is going to be," said Dr. Varma, who said he shared these and other ideas with top city health officials this past week. "But as far as I can tell, there is no downside to basically forcing the issue: Full immunity now means three doses of a vaccine, so go ahead and get it."

Mr. McGinn's experience illustrates the difficulties of contact tracing. He flew into La Guardia Airport on Nov. 18, excited to link up with other anime fans and soak up New York. He went out for dinner and drinks, stayed with two friends in an Airbnb in Hell's Kitchen and sang karaoke in Koreatown on a Saturday night. During the day, he attended the anime conference at the Javits Center.

The atmosphere was joyous, with the feel of a huge reunion. The "Artist Alley," which showcased anime artists, was so clogged and chaotic that one attendee, Lucy Camacho, 23, described it as "Penn Station during rush hour."

Tian Chang, 29, one of the artists, said she felt safe from Covid-19 at first, with many attendees wearing masks, as the convention required. Still, her worries grew, as the crowds did. She recalled "an explosion of attendees," with "crowds shoulder to shoulder in some areas." From her table, she watched as masks came off while people ate, chatted with friends or found an empty corner to take a nap.

Organizers said Mr. McGinn might have contracted Omicron elsewhere. "He was just one person who was at our event," said Kelly Comboni, president of Left Field Media, which organized Anime NYC. "There have been no other mass cases reported from our event."

Returning to Minnesota a few days before Thanksgiving, Mr. McGinn felt unusually tired. His slight cough was probably his asthma, he figured. After a long sleep — some 14 hours — he felt fine.

Then Mr. McGinn heard from a friend from the convention who lived in North Carolina and had tested positive for the virus.

On Nov. 23, he took an at-home Covid test, which came up positive. He also went to a large testing site for a P.C.R. test.

Other friends from the convention, all vaccinated, reported that they too had been infected.

"One guy had a bad day, but for the most part, mild symptoms for everyone," Mr. McGinn said. "It was a stay home, get a blanket and watch a movie kind of thing."

Mr. McGinn said he had no idea who infected whom, or where.

By the evening of Dec. 1, Minnesota health officials were convinced that a batch of samples they had recently analyzed for mutations included their first case of Omicron. A case investigator, Kathy Como-Sabetti, called Mr. McGinn to learn whom he might have exposed to the new variant. Mr. McGinn told her about the anime convention, with its crowds. "I kind of went, 'Wow, well, this changes our story,' " she said.

	<p>Minnesota officials immediately called the New York City Health Department with the bad news. “They took it very much in stride,” Ms. Como-Sabetti said.</p> <p>Dr. Ted Long, who oversees New York City’s Test and Trace Corps, said he was aware of five New York City residents who attended the anime convention and had also tested positive. These five had sought out testing, received positive test results and mentioned the anime convention when contact tracers called. But he did not know whether they had been infected with the new Omicron variant or the Delta variant, which is infecting some 1,500 people a day and driving a new surge of cases in the city.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is assisting the Minnesota and New York City Health Departments track the outbreak, a spokeswoman said, and it held a conference call Saturday morning with officials from local health departments.</p> <p>But with so many people in attendance, and a lag of two weeks, public health experts said it was not realistic to try to untangle precisely who infected whom. “I don’t think there needs to be an individual phone interview with the 53,000 people who attended,” said Dr. Wafaa El-Sadr, an epidemiology professor at Columbia University.</p> <p>Professor El-Sadr added that all individuals should follow C.D.C. guidelines, which instruct fully vaccinated people who have been exposed to wear a mask for up to 14 days — a period that ends this weekend — and get tested. “I think the pragmatic way to do contact tracing in this context is that everyone should consider themselves a close contact,” she said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Study: J&J booster works well w/Pfizer
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/05/world/omicron-variant-covid?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#jj-booster-pfizer-study
GIST	<p>People who received Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines may get as much benefit from a Johnson & Johnson booster shot as a Pfizer one. That’s the finding of a small study released on Sunday.</p> <p>Researchers at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston studied 65 people who had received two shots of the Pfizer vaccine. Six months after the second dose, the researchers gave 24 of the volunteers a third dose of the Pfizer vaccine and gave 41 the Johnson & Johnson shot. (The study was funded in part by Johnson & Johnson and has not yet been published in a scientific journal.)</p> <p>Both vaccine brands boosted the number of Covid-fighting T-cells, which are important for long-lasting protection and for preventing infections from turning into severe disease. But the T-cell increase delivered by the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was twice as high as that of Pfizer’s.</p> <p>The researchers also measured antibodies, which provide much of the protection immediately after vaccination. Volunteers who got a third Pfizer dose saw their antibody levels jump after two weeks, and then decline by a quarter by the fourth week. The Johnson & Johnson booster, by contrast, more than doubled antibody levels between the second and fourth weeks. At that point, Pfizer’s antibodies were still about 50 percent higher than Johnson & Johnson’s. For antibodies, that’s a relatively small difference. And both levels were well above the threshold scientists believe is needed for strong protection.</p> <p>The results are somewhat different from earlier studies. In October, a “mix and match” clinical trial organized by the National Institutes of Health reported that all three authorized vaccines — from Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson — caused antibody levels to rise when used as a booster. But Johnson & Johnson’s shot provided a much smaller boost than the others did. (The N.I.H. has not yet published how each booster affected the volunteers’ T-cells.)</p> <p>The difference between the two studies might be explained by the length of delay between shots. In the N.I.H. trial, many of the volunteers got their booster shots after three or four months, versus the new study’s wait of six months.</p>

	The Johnson & Johnson vaccine seems to have benefited more from the longer wait. Unlike Pfizer and Moderna, which are made from mRNA, Johnson & Johnson's is made from a modified cold virus. It may be important to give the immune system more time to return to a resting state before getting this type of vaccine.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Omicron spread puts Europe on edge
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/05/world/omicron-variant-covid?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#jump-in-cases-of-omicron-variant-puts-europe-on-edge
GIST	<p>LONDON — Dozens of new cases of the Omicron variant were reported in Britain and Denmark on Sunday, adding to increases across Europe and fueling fears that the virus has already spread widely.</p> <p>The coronavirus variant has spread to at least 45 nations worldwide, with the United States and much of Europe reporting a number of new cases in recent days. And while much uncertainty remains about what impact the Omicron variant will have on the pandemic, many nations have scrambled to impose travel restrictions — or in some cases introduced more serious measures.</p> <p>With cases of Omicron now growing worldwide, the prospects of even more stringent restrictions are looming over a holiday period that many had hoped would be a return to some normalcy. In Europe, already the epicenter of a surge in the pandemic in recent weeks, the uncertainties raised by Omicron have ignited fears that the winter ahead will be more difficult than anticipated.</p> <p>On Sunday, Britain's health security agency confirmed 86 additional cases of the Omicron variant, bringing the total nationally to 246, while authorities in Denmark reported 183 cases of the variant. Both nations are widely seen as leaders in genomic sequencing and testing, giving them an edge in tracking the spread of the virus and its mutations.</p> <p>Michael Ryan, the head of the emergencies program at the World Health Organization, speaking last week at a news conference, said European countries should have taken more precautions this autumn to protect their populations.</p> <p>“We will have to be a little patient in order to understand the implications of the Omicron variant,” he said, “but, certainly we are dealing with a crisis now. And that crisis is in Europe, and it is being driven by the Delta variant.”</p> <p>Now, he said, it is time for “everyone to recommit ourselves to controlling the pandemic of multiple strains or multiple variants of the same virus.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Officials: omicron cases likely to rise
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/05/world/omicron-variant-covid?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#omicron-us-cases-cdc-fauci
GIST	<p>Several dozen cases of the new Omicron variant of the coronavirus have been identified in the United States, a number that is “likely to rise,” Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said on Sunday on ABC's “This Week.”</p> <p>At least 17 states have detected cases, including in some people who have no known history of recent travel abroad, which experts have said suggests community spread of the variant in the United States.</p> <p>Genetic sequencing is required to determine which variant an infected patient has. In recent months the United States has greatly expanded sequencing efforts, but the process takes time. The C.D.C., for instance, typically takes about 10 days to yield results. According to Dr. Walensky, about 14 percent of all positive P.C.R. tests in the United States are being sequenced.</p>

The variant has a cluster of mutations [that have raised alarm around the world](#), but at this early stage, there are still more questions about it than answers, health officials said on Sunday.

“What we don’t yet know is how transmissible it will be, how well our vaccines will work, whether it will lead to more severe disease,” Dr. Walensky said.

American officials are in frequent communication with experts in South Africa where the variant is now widespread, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the nation’s leading infectious disease doctor, said Sunday on CNN’s “State of the Union.”

How quickly Omicron will spread in the United States, where the highly contagious Delta variant now accounts for 99.9 percent of all cases, remains unknown, Dr. Fauci said. “What’s going to happen when you have those two competing with each other?” he said, adding that, “we have really got to be careful” in assessing how severe Omicron might end up being.

A [new report](#) from South Africa has fueled hopes that the variant may not cause serious disease, though it remains far too early to conclude that, experts say. The report focuses primarily on 42 patients in a hospital in Gauteng province, [the center of the nation’s Omicron outbreak](#).

Although the researchers were not able to confirm that all the cases were caused by Omicron, the majority of patients with the virus did not require supplemental oxygen, the report says, and many were not hospitalized for Covid-19 itself. Instead they tested positive for the virus after being admitted for other reasons.

“This is a picture that has not been seen in previous waves,” wrote Dr. Fareed Abdullah, who directs the Office of AIDS and TB Research at the South African Medical Research Council and is the author of the new report.

But the findings come with major caveats, including the fact the patients were younger than during previous waves, and thus less likely to have severe disease. The data also accounts for just the first two weeks of the outbreak — hospitalizations and deaths are often a lagging indicator and could rise in the coming weeks.

Omicron’s rapid spread still poses risks, Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, the World Health Organization’s technical lead for coronavirus response, said on Sunday on CBS’s “Face the Nation.”

“Even if we have a large number of cases that are mild, some of those individuals will need hospitalizations, they will need to go into I.C.U., and some people will die,” she said. “And so more cases can mean more hospitalizations, and more hospitalizations could mean more deaths.”

She also urged governments to take swift action by increasing vaccination and encouraging mask wearing, distancing and ventilation to tamp down the spread of Omicron and Delta.

The Biden administration [recently announced plans](#) to expand its booster campaign and [increase access to rapid tests](#). On Monday, [the United States will begin requiring all incoming air travelers](#) to show [proof of a negative test taken the day before departure](#), regardless of their vaccination status or citizenship.

On Sunday, officials also defended [the government’s ban](#) on travelers from eight countries in southern Africa. The ban has been criticized for being both unhelpful and overly punitive.

“That ban was done at a time when we were really in the dark,” Dr. Fauci said, noting that it was intended to buy officials time to gather more information about Omicron. But now that more information is coming in from around the world, officials are frequently re-evaluating the ban, he said.

“Hopefully, we will be able to lift that ban within a quite reasonable period of time,” he said, adding that “we all feel very badly about the hardship” that it put on southern Africa.

But officials dismissed the possibility of domestic travel restrictions, noting that they would be impractical. “That would be extremely onerous for people who are trying to get around the country for things like holidays,” Dr. Francis S. Collins, the National Institutes of Health director, [said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on Sunday](#). “And I don’t know how much we’d gain by it.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 Myanmar court jails ousted civilian leader
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/05/world/myanmar-coup-verdict-aung-san-su-kyi#the-ousted-civilian-leader-is-facing-is-a-maximum-prison-term-of-102-years
GIST	<p>A court in Myanmar on Monday sentenced Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the country’s ousted civilian leader, to four years on charges of inciting public unrest and breaching Covid-19 protocols. She is facing a series of rulings that could keep her locked up for the rest of her life.</p> <p>Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained in a military coup in February, had been facing a maximum imprisonment of 102 years on a total of 11 charges.</p> <p>Her trials, which the United Nations and foreign governments have described as politically motivated, have been held in closed-door hearings in Naypyidaw, Myanmar’s capital. The junta has barred all five of her lawyers from speaking to the news media, saying that their communications could “destabilize the country.”</p> <p>“This ridiculous ruling is a travesty of justice,” Charles Santiago, a Malaysian legislator and chairman of the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, said in a statement.</p> <p>Mr. Santiago said the sentencing was further evidence that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations “must hold the line against this illegal takeover” by the junta.</p> <p>Prosecutors have continued to slap more charges on Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi as her case proceeded. The verdicts rendered on Monday are the first of several that are expected to be announced in the coming months.</p> <p>The charge of breaching Covid-19 protocols stems from an episode during the 2020 election campaign in which Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi stood outside, in a face mask and face shield, and waved to supporters passing by in vehicles.</p> <p>Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, 76, is a flawed hero for a troubled nation.</p> <p>She is held up as an almost godlike figure among her supporters in Myanmar, who describe her as a defender of the country’s democracy — a struggle for which she won a Nobel Peace Prize. But her reputation on the international stage was tarnished over her complicity in the military’s mass atrocities against the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group.</p> <p>The guilty verdict is likely to galvanize a protest movement that has spurred thousands of people to take up arms against the army since February, when the generals seized power.</p> <p>On Sunday morning, a military truck plowed into a group of protesters who were carrying banners bearing her portrait and quotations of hers on the streets of Yangon, Myanmar’s most populous city, causing fatalities. At night, protesters continued to demonstrate in the streets, and residents banged pots and pans to register their anger.</p> <p>In the months since the coup, people have gathered in the streets, doctors and nurses have stopped work in protest, and many have refused to pay taxes in a campaign known as the Civil Disobedience Movement.</p>

Despite the threat of arrest, there is still [widespread support for the movement](#). [A growing number of soldiers are defecting](#), teaming up with [armed protesters](#) and insurgent groups to launch hit-and-run attacks against the military.

The junta has responded by cracking down — it has killed more than 1,300 people and arrested more than 10,600 others, according to the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners \(Burma\)](#), a rights organization based in Thailand.

For many of her supporters, Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi was seen as the only politician who could lead Myanmar toward full democracy.

After a previous coup, in 1962, the military ruled the country for half a century. When Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi was elected in 2015, she was forced to share power with the army, which appointed 25 percent of Parliament. In November 2020, she led her party to [a landslide election victory](#), trouncing the military-backed opposition party.

She [has not been seen in public](#) or been able to speak to anyone aside from her lawyers since she was detained on Feb. 1. Just hours before she and her colleagues from the National League of Democracy Party were to take their seats in Parliament, military officers detained them, accusing them of voter fraud. Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi has denied the charge.

Rights activists have [condemned the charge of incitement](#), saying that it is used to intimidate critics of the military. It carries a maximum sentence of three years and states that anyone who “publishes or circulates any statement, rumor or report” with “intent to cause, or which is likely to cause, fear or alarm to the public” could be found liable.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 Myanmar ousted president, mayor jailed
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/05/world/myanmar-coup-verdict-aung-san-suu-kyi#myanmar-president-mayor-convicted
GIST	<p>The Myanmar court that sentenced Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to four years on Monday also convicted two longtime allies, including Myanmar’s ousted president, U Win Myint.</p> <p>Mr. Win Myint and U Myo Aung, the ousted mayor of the capital city, Naypyidaw, were both found guilty of responsibility along with Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi for two letters sent by the National League for Democracy after the coup urging the international community not to recognize the regime and declaring all laws enacted by the junta to be illegal.</p> <p>Mr. Win Myint, who was also convicted of violating Covid-19 protocols, was sentenced to four years in custody. Mr. Myo Aung, who was convicted just on the incitement charge, was sentenced to two years.</p> <p>The defense argued that none of the defendants could be held culpable for the letters since all three were in custody at the time that the letters were sent.</p> <p>Mr. Win Myint, 70, assumed the presidency in 2018 after he was chosen by Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, who is constitutionally barred from holding that office.</p> <p>He testified during the trial that after his arrest, two army officers demanded he resign on the grounds of ill health and warned him that refusing would cause trouble. He said he told them he would rather die.</p> <p>Like Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, he had also been charged with breaking Covid regulations by standing outside in a face mask and face shield while waving to supporters passing by in vehicles. He denied violating any health rules.</p>

	<p>Based on a complaint filed by the regime with the police, Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi and Mr. Win Myint are expected to face one count of corruption alleging that they benefited from the government's acquisition and rental of a helicopter.</p> <p>The two are also among 16 leaders of the National League for Democracy who will face charges of electoral fraud brought by Myanmar's election commission.</p> <p>Mr. Myo Aung, a 70-year-old physician who was appointed mayor in 2016 by former President Htin Kyaw, lived next door to Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw. When he saw military vehicles outside her house on the morning of the coup, he went to check on her and was arrested.</p> <p>He is also a co-defendant with Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi in her ongoing corruption trial. He is accused of granting permission to build on land in the capital in exchange for money that was then given to National League for Democracy candidates, state media reported. He denies the charge.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/05 Gas prices drop 2 cents over 2 weeks
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/5/average-us-price-of-gas-drops-2-cents-over-2-weeks/
GIST	<p>CAMARILLO, Calif. (AP) – The average U.S. price of regular-grade gasoline fell 2 cents over past two weeks, to \$3.46 per gallon.</p> <p>Industry analyst Trilby Lundberg of the Lundberg Survey said Sunday that the price drop is partly because of a crash in crude oil costs.</p> <p>It was the first decline in gas prices in 14 weeks, Lundberg said. The average price at the pump is \$1.24 higher than it was one year ago.</p> <p>Nationwide, the highest average price for regular-grade gas is in the San Francisco Bay Area, at \$4.80 per gallon. The lowest average is in Houston, at \$2.91 per gallon.</p> <p>According to the survey, the average price of diesel was unchanged, at \$3.69 a gallon.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/05 Italy unvaccinated face new restrictions
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/unvaccinated-italians-face-restrictions-holidays-81578272
GIST	<p>MILAN -- Italy is making life more uncomfortable for unvaccinated people as the holidays draw near, excluding them from indoor restaurants, theaters and museums to reduce the spread of coronavirus and encourage vaccine skeptics to get their shots.</p> <p>Starting Monday through Jan. 15, Italian police can check whether diners in restaurants or bars have a "super" green health pass certifying that they are either vaccinated or have recently recovered from the virus. Smart phone applications that check people's health pass status will be updated and those who have merely tested negative in recent days for COVID-19 will no longer be allowed into concerts, movies or performances.</p> <p>The number of new COVID-19 infections in Italy has been on a gradual rise for the past six weeks, even before concerns arose about the new omicron variant. That's a worrying trend as Italians plan holiday parties and getaways to spend time with friends and family. Christmas travel and holiday gatherings were strictly limited last year due to a steeper rise in contagion.</p> <p>While both Germany and Austria are moving toward making vaccines obligatory, Italy is instead tightening restrictions on the unvaccinated at the most convivial time of the year — while allowing those who are vaccinated go about life more or less as usual.</p>

	<p>Italy's vaccination rate is higher than many of its neighbors, at 85% of the eligible population aged 12 and older and 77% of the total population. But people in their 30s, 40s and 50s have proved the most reluctant to get vaccinated, with nearly 3.5 million still not having received their first doses.</p> <p>They are also the same age group that is now being hardest hit by the virus, according to Silvio Brusaferro, head of Italy's National Health Institute.</p> <p>Also starting Monday, people must have a health pass to access local public transportation and stay in hotels — that can be acquired also with a negative recent test. In Milan, the prefect said health passes will be checked before people are allowed onto the subway or buses.</p> <p>With the holiday shopping season heating up, many cities including Rome and Milan have ordered mask mandates even outdoors.</p> <p>Public health officials say vaccinations, along with prudent public behavior including wearing masks in crowds, are key to reducing infection levels as winter weather pushes more activities indoors. They credit Italy's relatively high level of immunization as one reason that the infection curve is not as steep as last winter, when broad restrictions were imposed with the spread of the delta variant.</p> <p>"It is clear that after two years of the pandemic, we cannot easily close schools to physical classes and shut down economic activity," said Gianni Rezza, the health ministry's director of prevention.</p> <p>"Therefore, you can try to keep the virus spread down with measures that are sustainable, and with proper use of the health pass. Then the big bet is on the vaccinations," he said.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/05 Japan's new military muscle flexing
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/japans-military-worlds-strongest-build-81576818
GIST	<p>ENIWA, Japan -- Dozens of tanks and hundreds of soldiers fired explosives and machine guns in drills Monday on Japan's northern island of Hokkaido, a main stronghold for a nation that is perhaps the world's least-known military powerhouse.</p> <p>Just across the sea from rival Russia, Japan opened up its humbly named Self Defense Force's firing exercises to the media in a display of public firepower that coincides with a recent escalation of Chinese and Russian military moves around Japanese territory.</p> <p>The drills, which foreign journalists rarely have a chance to witness, will continue for nine days and include about 1,300 Ground Self Defense Force troops. On Monday, as hundreds of soldiers cheered from the sidelines and waved unit flags, lines of tanks shot at targets meant to represent enemy missiles or armored vehicles.</p> <p>The exercises illuminate a fascinating, easy-to-miss point. Japan, despite an officially pacifist constitution written when memories of its World War II rampage were still fresh — and painful — boasts a military that puts all but a few nations to shame.</p> <p>And, with a host of threats lurking in Northeast Asia, its hawkish leaders are eager for more.</p> <p>It's not an easy sell. In a nation still reviled by many of its neighbors for its past military actions, and where domestic pacifism runs high, any military buildup is controversial.</p> <p>Japan has focused on its defensive capabilities and carefully avoids using the word "military" for its troops. But as it looks to defend its territorial and military interests against an assertive China, North Korea and Russia, officials in Tokyo are pushing citizens to put aside widespread unease over a more robust role for the military and support increased defense spending.</p>

As it is, tens of billions of dollars each year have built an arsenal of nearly 1,000 warplanes and dozens of destroyers and submarines. Japan's forces rival those of Britain and France, and show no sign of slowing down in a pursuit of the best equipment and weapons money can buy.

Not everyone agrees with this buildup. Critics, both Japan's neighbors and at home, urge Tokyo to learn from its past and pull back from military expansion.

There's also domestic wariness over nuclear weapons. Japan, the only nation to have atomic bombs dropped on it in war, possesses no nuclear deterrent, unlike other top global militaries, and relies on the so-called U.S. nuclear umbrella.

Proponents of the new military muscle flexing, however, say the expansion is well-timed and crucial to the Japanese alliance with Washington.

China and Russia have stepped up military cooperation in recent years in an attempt to counter growing U.S.-led regional partnerships.

In October, a fleet of five warships each from China and Russia circled Japan as they traveled through the Pacific to the East China Sea. Last month, their warplanes flew together near Japan's airspace, causing Japanese fighter jets to scramble. In fiscal year 2020 through March, Japanese fighters scrambled more than 700 times — two-thirds against Chinese warplanes, with the remainder mostly against Russians — the Defense Ministry said.

Russia's military also recently deployed coastal defense missile systems, the Bastion, near disputed islands off the northern coast of Hokkaido.

Japan was disarmed after its WW II defeat. But a month after the Korean War began in 1950, U.S. occupation forces in Japan created a 75,000-member lightly armed de facto army called the National Police Reserve. The Self Defense Force, the country's current military, was founded in 1954.

Today, Japan is ranked fifth globally in overall military power after the United States, Russia, China and India, and its defense budget ranked sixth in the 2021 ranking of 140 countries by the Global Firepower rating site.

During archconservative former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's more than eight-year rule, which ended a year ago, Japan significantly expanded its military role and budget. Abe also watered down the war-renouncing Article 9 of the constitution in 2015, allowing Japan to come to the defense of the United States and other partner nations.

Japan has rapidly stepped up its military role in its alliance with Washington, and has made more purchases of costly American weapons and equipment, including fighter jets and missile interceptors.

"Japan faces different risks coming from multiple fronts," said defense expert Heigo Sato, a professor at the Institute of World Studies at Takushoku University in Tokyo.

Among those risks are North Korea's increased willingness to test high-powered missiles and other weapons, provocations by armed Chinese fishing boats and coast guard ships, and Russia's deployment of missiles and naval forces.

One of North Korea's missiles flew over Hokkaido, landing in the Pacific in 2017. In September, another fell within the 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone off northwestern Japan.

Under a bilateral security pact, Japan hosts about 50,000 U.S. troops, mostly on the southern island of Okinawa, which, along with Japanese units in Hokkaido, are strategically crucial to the U.S. presence in the Pacific.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who took office in October, said during his first troop review that he would consider “all options,” including possibly pursuing pre-emptive strike capabilities to further “increase Japan’s defense power” — a divisive issue that opponents say violates the constitution.

Japan has more than 900 warplanes, 48 destroyers, including eight Aegis missile-combating systems, and 20 submarines. That exceeds Britain, Germany and Italy. Japan is also buying 147 F-35s, including 42 F-35Bs, making it the largest user of American stealth fighters outside of the United States, where 353 are to be deployed.

Among Japan's biggest worries is China's increased naval activity, including an aircraft carrier that has been repeatedly spotted off Japan's southern coasts.

Japan has customarily maintained a defense budget cap at 1% of its GDP, though in recent years the country has faced calls from Washington to spend more.

Kishida says he is open to doubling the cap to the NATO standard of 2%.

As a first step, his Cabinet recently approved a 770 billion yen (\$6.8 billion) extra budget for the fiscal year to accelerate missile defense and reconnaissance activity around Japanese territorial seas and airspace, and to bolster mobility and emergency responses to defend its remote East China Sea islands. That would bring the 2021 defense spending total to 6.1 trillion yen (\$53.2 billion), up 15% from the previous year, and 1.09% of Japan's GDP.

Experts say a defense budget increase is the price Japan must pay now to make up for a shortfall during much of the postwar era, when the country prioritized economic growth over national security.

As China is playing tough in the Asia-Pacific region, Taiwan has emerged as a regional flashpoint, with Japan, the United States and other democracies developing closer ties with the self-ruled island that Beijing regards as a renegade territory to be united by force if necessary.

China’s buildup of military facilities in the South China Sea has heightened Tokyo's concerns in the East China Sea, where the Japanese-controlled Senkaku islands are also claimed by Beijing, which calls them Diaoyu. China has sent a fleet of armed coast guard boats to routinely circle them and to go in and out of Japanese-claimed waters, sometimes chasing Japanese fishing boats in the area.

Japan deploys PAC3 land-to-air missile interceptors on its westernmost island of Yonaguni, which is only 110 kilometers (68 miles) east of Taiwan.

In part because of a relative decline of America's global influence, Japan has expanded military partnerships and joint exercises beyond its alliance with the United States, including with Australia, Canada, Britain, France and other European countries, as well as in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Japan also cooperates with NATO.

Despite the government's argument that more is needed, there are worries domestically over Japan's rapid expansion of defense capabilities and costs.

“Although the defense policy needs to respond flexibly to changes in the national security environment, a soaring defense budget could cause neighboring countries to misunderstand that Japan is becoming a military power and accelerate an arms race,” the newspaper Tokyo Shimbun said in a recent editorial.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 China communists bash US democracy
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/chinas-communists-bash-us-democracy-biden-summit-81553342

BEIJING -- China's Communist Party took American democracy to task on Saturday, sharply criticizing a global democracy summit being hosted by President Joe Biden next week and extolling the virtues of its governing system.

Party officials questioned how a polarized country that botched its response to COVID-19 could lecture others, and said that efforts to force others to copy the Western democratic model are “doomed to fail.”

The harsh rhetoric reflects a growing clash of values that has been thrust into the spotlight as China rises as a global power. The question is whether the United States and other leading democracies can peacefully co-exist with a powerful authoritarian state whose actions are at odds with the Western model that emerged victorious at the end of the Cold War.

The pandemic exposed defects in the American system, said Tian Peiyan, the deputy director of the Communist Party's Policy Research Office. He blamed the high COVID-19 death toll in the U.S. on political disputes and a divided government from the highest to the lowest levels.

“Such democracy brings not happiness but disaster to voters,” he said at a news conference to release a government report on what the Communist Party calls its form of democracy, which is firmly under party control.

Neither China nor Russia are among about 110 governments that have been invited to Biden's two-day virtual “Summit for Democracy,” which starts Thursday and will address strengthening democracy, defending against authoritarianism, corruption and human rights.

The participation of Taiwan, a self-governing democracy that China says should be under its rule, has further angered Beijing.

U.S.-China relations remain strained despite a virtual summit between Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping last month. The American president has repeatedly framed differences with China in his broader call for the U.S. and its allies to demonstrate that democracies can offer humanity a better path toward progress than autocracies.

The Communist Party has ruled China single-handedly since 1949. It says that various views are reflected through consultative bodies and elected village and residents committees, but silences most public criticism with censorship and sometimes arrest.

The party argues that strong central leadership is needed to maintain stability in a sprawling country that has been riven by division and war over the centuries.

“In such a large country with 56 ethnic groups and more than 1.4 billion people, if there is no party leadership, ... and we uphold the so-called democracy of the West, it will be easy to mess things up and democracy will work the opposite way,” Tian said.

China has been accused of mass incarceration, torture and other human rights violations as it enforces control over ethnic communities in its remote western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. The party rejects the accusations and says it is rooting out extremism and separatist movements.

The recent difficulties faced by some Western democracies have given Communist Party leaders more confidence in their system as they try to build China into a global power. State media often cite the chaos of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol after the last presidential election. The report issued Saturday said “today's world is facing challenges of excessive democracy.”

Chinese officials frequently accuse the U.S. and others of using democracy as a cover to try to suppress China's rise, a charge echoed at the news conference by Xu Lin, the vice minister of the party's publicity department.

	<p>"The U.S. calls itself a 'leader of democracy' and organizes and manipulates the so-called Summit for Democracy," he said. "In fact, it cracks down and hampers countries with different social systems and development models in the name of democracy."</p> <p>Xu called it undemocratic for others to demand their form of democracy, saying they have a mixed track record themselves.</p> <p>"Their domestic governance is messed up, but they point fingers at and criticize other democracies," he said. "Is this the democracy they advertised?"</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/04 Seattle homelessness budget frustrates
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/seattles-final-budget-shows-tough-road-ahead-for-new-regional-homelessness-authority/
GIST	<p>Seattle's confusing, grueling budget season, with a lame-duck mayor, a council president running a failed campaign to replace her and a budget chair in the midst of her own reelection campaign, ended Thursday and left few in city leadership completely happy.</p> <p>"This was a difficult budget year and I did not get everything I wanted in this budget, as others have said as well," Dan Strauss, Ballard's representative on the council, said Nov. 22, the day he and seven other City Council members voted to pass a budget.</p> <p>But while back-and-forth over the police budget hit headlines almost daily, less attention was paid to the city's homelessness spending. There were some wins for advocates: new money for people living in vehicles and better pay for nonprofit shelter workers.</p> <p>But the City Council and the mayor frustrated the aspirations of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority, whose CEO Marc Dones had asked them to fund a multimillion-dollar plan to alleviate homelessness downtown first, before moving to other neighborhoods.</p> <p>City Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda, the council's budget chair, said the city shouldn't be expected to provide bottomless pockets for homelessness response. This budget included record-high investments in affordable housing and homelessness, and Seattle already is the biggest funder of the Regional Homelessness Authority.</p> <p>"It is a regional authority, and my hope is more of the Sound cities step up," Mosqueda said. "More people are coming here because the regional cities are not providing support."</p> <p>Data from Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan's office has shown many people enrolled in Seattle shelters became homeless in other parts of the county, especially South King County.</p> <p>Seattle in the last few years has massively expanded how much public money the city spends on homelessness programs, from \$50 million in 2015 to a planned \$156 million in 2022. But the city has been unable to make a dent in the problem and its financial management practices didn't expand proportionally; the issue has only gotten worse, and more than \$800,000 was lost to an alleged fraudster posing as a homelessness nonprofit last year.</p> <p>That and the fact that surrounding cities haven't funded homelessness commensurately led to the creation of a King County Regional Homelessness Authority last year, which is supposed to take all funding from Seattle and the county and use it to address the problem regionally.</p> <p>This authority is supposed to help remake a Byzantine, fractured system with dozens of nonprofits and providers; scores of federal, state and local contracts; and a tsunami of complicated paperwork that deeply complicates things as small as getting a federal rent voucher. And many hoped that it would get much of</p>

the politics out of homelessness work, so nonprofits will get money based on the quality of their work and not who their leaders know.

But several budget asks from the authority were almost ignored or greatly downsized by the City Council, which instead poured millions into setting up an RV program that could be hard for the fledgling authority to properly manage, and threw smaller amounts in piecemeal fashion at existing programs.

“If we’re going to set up this authority and hire somebody and say that they are in charge of this and not fund them, how are we really supposed to move forward?” said Erin Goodman, executive director of the Sodo Business Improvement Area. “But this seems to be a city thing where we like an idea but then we don’t scale it to size to actually work.”

In October, the homelessness authority [presented the council with a plan](#) to focus on the downtown area to win a popular victory in what could turn out to be a long battle: Dones asked for tens of millions to design a system for outreach that relies on workers who have been homeless and navigated social services before, and a super-staffed shelter for homeless people in the throes of serious, debilitating mental illness.

The plan had the vocal support of business groups who have clamored for more resources to address growing visible homelessness in the area.

Instead of funding those, the council passed a statement of legislative intent to fund the proposed peer navigation outreach system in the future and put \$5 million — less than a third of what Dones asked for — toward the high-acuity shelter.

“The metric’s always been, ‘Well, we’re spending more money,’” said Jon Scholes, president of the Downtown Seattle Association and a supporter of the authority’s plan. “And then you walk down the street and you don’t see a difference.”

This \$5 million won’t be able to make a big dent in downtown like Dones had hoped.

“We’re going to have to redo the plan,” Dones said. “What this town does not need is another snake oil salesman who comes in and says, ‘Here’s my plan to fix this thing, and I can do it on bubble gum and tape.’”

Dones had hoped to renovate an undisclosed nursing facility into the shelter, but now they will likely have to pool this \$5 million with money from King County for a mental health crisis center possibly located on a Sodo plot that used to be a Tesla warehouse — but that plan is far from realization.

It’s important to Dones that the plan has adequate funding not just to provide beds, but to competitively pay staffers who are trained to deal with people in psychosis.

The budget does give the authority more money for administrative costs and millions to raise wages for human services workers at shelters and homeless housing, a long-standing issue that has become more pronounced as the city and county struggle to hire staff for new shelters.

Harold Odom, co-chair of the authority’s Implementation Board of experts, has advocated for the city to improve tiny house villages, where he has lived for years. While the council included some money for operating and improving tiny house villages, Odom still thinks, overall, the City Council looks for immediate fixes rather than long-term solutions.

“I don’t think (City Council members) look at things in a way that’s not vote-counting,” Odom said. “That’s how they survive, but that’s not helping people who are homeless.”

Council also gave the authority a project the city’s human services department was loath to execute: a million more dollars for a lot where RV or vehicle campers can park safely. This is on top of funding the

city allocated last year for about 25 RVs that was never used because the mayor's staffers [said they couldn't create a successful program](#), according to emails shared with The Seattle Times.

The last time the city tried RV "safe lots," as they're called, it was widely regarded as a failure and, in the few that remained by 2018, people [were dying in the lots faster than they were finding housing](#).

Dones seemed undaunted by previous failures and a lack of successful models elsewhere in the country but also said they wished the council had funded the other asks.

"The answer is both," Dones said. "There is simply no immediate future where we are saying 'this or that?' It is going to be both for a while."

The Seattle Human Services Coalition and Mayor-elect Bruce Harrell both praised the homelessness budget.

"I strongly support the necessary investments made in this budget to increase services, supportive housing, targeted support for those living in vehicles, and affordable housing development," Harrell said in a news release.

Harrell decisively won the mayoral election on a platform that criticized how the mayor and council dealt with homelessness. He added that he wants more investments to clean up litter and restore parks and green spaces.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Omicron variant discovered in WA
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/omicron-variant-discovered-in-washington-state/
GIST	<p>Washington state health authorities Saturday confirmed three cases of the omicron variant of the coronavirus have been found in Thurston, Pierce and King counties. At least one of the three people infected had been vaccinated.</p> <p>The patients, two men and one woman, range in age from 20 to 39, according to the state Department of Health.</p> <p>"We knew that it was a matter of time before omicron was sequenced in our state and so we were anticipating this very news," said Dr. Umair Shah, the state's health secretary, in a statement. "We strongly urge people to get vaccinated and get their boosters as soon as possible to maximize their level of protection from any variant."</p> <p>"We may be tired of this virus," Shah added in a media briefing Saturday evening. "This virus is certainly not tired of us."</p> <p>Confirmation of the three cases came with lab results at midday Saturday from the UW Medicine Virology Lab, and patients are still being informed. Details about their conditions are unknown.</p> <p>Shah said health officials do not yet have information on the severity of the disease in the three cases or whether any of the three were hospitalized.</p> <p>However Public Health – Seattle & King County provided a little detail on the King County case: a woman in her 20s who tested positive for the coronavirus on Nov. 29.</p> <p>Based on initial vaccination records, she had been vaccinated, and received a booster shot recently, likely after her exposure to omicron, the health agency said.</p> <p>The vaccination status of the other two cases has not been established.</p>

This early in the investigation, state health officials do not believe the three cases are related, but the travel history of the patients is unknown.

Dr. Jeff Duchin, health officer for Public Health – Seattle & King County, called it “stressful news that no one wants to hear after the long difficult ordeal we’ve already had with COVID-19 ... Now during the holiday season of all times COVID-19 has thrown another nasty curveball at us.”

Yet he cautioned against fearing the worst. “This ball has not reached the plate yet. And we don’t know if this scary-looking pitch will be a ball or strike,” Duchin said.

He went on to explain that because it’s so early in the emergence of the omicron variant, “right now we don’t have solid answers to our most important questions: How easily the virus spreads; whether it causes more or less severe illness; and how effective existing COVID-19 vaccines and treatments are against omicron.”

“We do know enough to be concerned,” he added.

Summarizing the little that’s known so far about omicron, Duchin said preliminary data suggests this variant may spread even more readily than the delta variant and is more likely to reinfect people who’ve already had COVID.

On the other hand, he said, preliminary evidence also suggests there may be fewer severe cases.

Shah said, “Omicron is a reason for concern. However, it is not a reason to panic.”

“Not going back to square one”

New COVID cases in South Africa first alerted the world to omicron about 10 days ago, and the variant is quickly being discovered in a number of regions around the country. Shah said omicron cases have now been found in 38 countries.

Washington and Massachusetts announced their first cases Saturday, a day after New Jersey, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Maryland reported their first confirmed cases. Missouri reported its first presumed case Friday. The variant also has been detected in New York, Nebraska, Minnesota, California, Hawaii, Colorado and Utah.

Duchin said the arrival of this variant doesn’t mean the community will be set back to the worst days of the coronavirus pandemic.

“We are not going back to square one of the pandemic,” he said. “Omicron may pose new challenges that we will need to respond to, but compared to the early days of the pandemic, we know much more about COVID-19, and we’re better prepared for it.”

Washington state epidemiologist Dr. Scott Lindquist during the media briefing said, “I don’t think any of us feel that we’re going to stop the spread of this. It is clearly already here. But there are things we can do to limit the spread.”

Lindquist said it will take “weeks not days” for scientists studying the variant’s impact to gauge its severity and to understand the efficacy of the vaccines against it.

In the meantime, all the state health officials in the briefing urged people to get vaccinated and to get their booster doses when eligible, and to adopt the standard COVID-19 prevention measures: Wear good-quality masks indoors, improve indoor air ventilation, wash hands frequently and avoid crowded outdoor spaces.

Duchin said anyone who becomes ill with COVID symptoms should “isolate yourself and not expose additional people. Don’t go to work. Don’t go to school.”

Surge of cases now likely

He added that those who come down with symptoms should let public health authorities know with whom they have been in contact, so that those people can be informed to try to limit the spread of the virus.

Despite such precautions, Duchin said “it’s possible we may see a rapid and potentially large surge in cases, with most infections and most serious infections expected among the unvaccinated — although we know that even vaccinated people can be infected.”

A look at what is happening in South Africa shows “a potential for cases to come really fast,” Duchin said.

In a statement, Gov. Jay Inslee said, “We knew this day was inevitable, but the good news is we have more tools at our disposal to fight the virus than at any previous point in the pandemic, and we must continue to protect ourselves and our communities.”

At the media briefing, Dr. Tao Kwan-Gett, a pediatrician and the state Department of Health’s chief science officer, was asked what parents of very young children should do now, given that their kids may be too young to wear a mask and are not yet eligible to be vaccinated.

First, he noted that with current variants of the virus, for the vast majority of children, including those under age 2, COVID is not a severe illness.

He said there have been “maybe more than a dozen deaths in children and teens” out of the thousands of deaths in the state.

“We don’t have any indication that omicron is different from delta in this way,” Kwan-Gett said.

“I don’t think this is a situation where if you have a child under 2 that you need to go back to quarantine at home. I think you can still enjoy the holiday activities,” he said.

But he added that parents of a child under age 2 with a chronic health condition, “may want to take special care and perhaps talk to your primary care provider.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 Germany advises against Christmas travel
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-lifestyle-health-travel-d5cb2d658afec5aeb84c3a028cba0c44
GIST	<p>BERLIN (AP) — Germany’s incoming transport minister is advising people against traveling over Christmas as the country tries to stem a wave of coronavirus infections.</p> <p>Federal and state leaders on Thursday announced tough new restrictions that largely target unvaccinated people, preventing them from entering nonessential stores, restaurants, sports and cultural venues. In a longer-term move, parliament will consider a general vaccine mandate.</p> <p>Volker Wissing, whose pro-business party has designated him as transport minister in the incoming government, told Sunday’s edition of the Bild am Sonntag newspaper that “in the current situation, it seems more sensible to spend Christmas in a small group at home and not to plan big trips across the country.”</p> <p>“Winter 2021 will be more dramatic than winter 2020,” he added.</p> <p>The new government under center-left Chancellor-designate Olaf Scholz is expected to take office on Wednesday, subject to the three parties that will form it signing off on their coalition deal and Scholz winning the backing of a parliamentary majority.</p>

	<p>At least 68.9% of Germans are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, short of the government's aim of a minimum 75% vaccination rate. The shortfall has been blamed as a key factor in a surge of new virus cases in recent weeks.</p> <p>Official figures suggest that the infection rate may now be stabilizing, but at too high a level. On Sunday, the national disease control center reported 42,055 new daily cases and a seven-day infection rate of 439.2 new cases per 100,000 residents. Another 94 deaths in 24 hours brought Germany's confirmed total in the pandemic to 103,040.</p> <p>Outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel made a last direct appeal to Germans to get vaccinated on Saturday, saying that a resurgence in deaths is "so bitter because it is avoidable."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Omicron 'most mutated virus ever seen'?
SOURCE	https://ktla.com/news/scientists-call-omicron-most-mutated-virus-wed-ever-seen-why-does-that-matter/
GIST	<p>There's a lot we don't yet know about the omicron variant of COVID-19, which is starting to spread around the world and has been detected multiple times here in the U.S. There are signs out of South Africa it may cause different symptoms – but it's too early to draw broad conclusions. It's also not yet clear if it's better at evading vaccine protection than previous variants.</p> <p>But there's one thing we keep hearing from the scientists who've gotten a close look at the omicron version of the virus: It's really mutated.</p> <p>"This is probably the most mutated virus we'd ever seen," Alex Sigal told CBS News. Sigal leads a team of researchers working to learn more about omicron.</p> <p>Lawrence Young, a virologist at the University of Warwick, described omicron as "the most heavily mutated version of the virus we have seen," including potentially worrying changes never before seen all in the same virus.</p> <p>More mutations don't necessarily make a virus more dangerous, either. "In principle, mutations can also work against each other," Jesse Bloom, an evolutionary biologist in Seattle, told the New York Times.</p> <p>But viruses, like other organisms, evolve over time to increase their chance of survival. A stronger virus, of course, is generally bad news for us people. That's why scientists are initially concerned when they see a highly mutated virus.</p> <p>Of omicron's many mutations, about 30 of them are on a part of the virus called the spike protein. That concerns scientists because it could affect how transmissible the variant is.</p> <p>Sharon Peacock, who has led genetic sequencing of COVID-19 in Britain at the University of Cambridge, said the data so far suggest the new variant has mutations "consistent with enhanced transmissibility," but said that "the significance of many of the mutations is still not known."</p> <p>But scientists who've gotten a close look also note omicron lacks some of the mutations that delta has that make it highly contagious. There's a chance the delta variant, the dominant strain in the U.S. right now, is still more transmissible than omicron, so omicron may never take off.</p> <p>"That's really the big question. You know, when it gets into a population that has Delta, is it going to out-compete or not out-compete?" Robert Garry, a virologist at Tulane University, told CNN.</p> <p>In addition to mutations that make omicron more contagious, scientists are also looking at any mutations that might cause more severe disease or more easily evade the vaccines.</p>

	<p>“There is currently no information to suggest that symptoms associated with omicron are different from those from other variants,” the World Health Organization said. It said there’s no evidence – yet – that COVID vaccines, tests and treatments are any less effective against omicron.</p> <p>Some experts say that all of omicron’s mutations could mean that vaccine makers may have to adapt their products at some point. That also remains to be seen.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Covid outbreak New Orleans cruise ship
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-louisiana-new-orleans-1f8edb74567df1abdbc29161d800056f
GIST	<p>NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Ten people aboard a Norwegian Cruise Line ship approaching New Orleans have tested positive for COVID-19, officials said Saturday night.</p> <p>The Norwegian Breakaway had departed New Orleans on Nov. 28 and is due to return this weekend, the Louisiana Department of Health said in a news release. Over the past week, the ship made stops in Belize, Honduras and Mexico.</p> <p>More than 3,200 people are on board the ship, officials said.</p> <p>According to the statement, Norwegian “has been adhering to appropriate quarantine and isolation protocols as new cases and exposures have been identified aboard this vessel.”</p> <p>Prior to disembarking in New Orleans, each person on board will be tested for the coronavirus. Anyone who tests positive will either go directly home or self-isolate in accommodations provided by the cruise line, officials said.</p> <p>Officials did not release any information about the conditions of those who have contracted the virus.</p> <p>Cruise ships were an early source of outbreaks last year at the start of the coronavirus pandemic as some ships were rejected at ports and passengers were forced into quarantine. Some passengers died of COVID-19 at sea while others fell so ill they had to be carried out of the vessels on stretchers.</p> <p>The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a no-sail order in March 2020, prompting a standstill that ended last June as cruise ships began to leave U.S. ports with new health and safety requirements. According to Norwegian’s website, the company requires all passengers and crew members to have been vaccinated against the virus at least two weeks prior to departure.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Rio de Janeiro cancels NYE party
SOURCE	https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/rio-de-janeiro-cancels-new-year-s-eve-party-on-omicron-fears-1.1691095
GIST	<p>(Bloomberg) --The major of Rio de Janeiro canceled plans for the city’s New Year’s Eve celebrations following advice from the state that they weren’t safe to go ahead as the first cases of the omicron variant were reported in the country.</p> <p>“We respect science,” Mayor Eduardo Paes wrote on his Twitter account Saturday. “The City Council says it can go ahead. The State’s says no. So it can’t. We will thus cancel the official New Year’s Eve celebration in Rio.”</p> <p>Paes said there was no way to organize the celebrations without a guarantee from all health authorities. The party “will be missed, but the important thing is that we continue vaccinating and saving lives,” he said.</p>

	Brazil has reported 22.1 million Covid-19 cases, with 10,627 confirmed in the last 24 hours, according to Health Ministry data. More than 20 capitals have canceled their New Year's Eve events amid concerns regarding the omicron variant, Exame reports, citing official statements.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Study: omicron link to common cold virus
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/omicron-possibly-more-infectious-because-it-shares-genetic-code-with-common-cold-coronavirus-study-says/ar-AARscA9
GIST	<p>The omicron variant is likely to have picked up genetic material from another virus that causes the common cold in humans, according to a new preliminary study, prompting one of its authors to suggest omicron could have greater transmissibility but lower virulence than other variants of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Researchers from Nference, a Cambridge, Mass.-based firm that analyzes biomedical information, sequenced omicron and found a snippet of genetic code that is also present in a virus that can bring about a cold. They say this particular mutation could have occurred in a host simultaneously infected by SARS-CoV-2, also known as the novel coronavirus, and the HCoV-229E coronavirus, which can cause the common cold. The shared genetic code with HCoV-229E has not been detected in other novel coronavirus variants, the scientists said.</p> <p>The study is in preprint and has not been peer-reviewed.</p> <p>The “striking” similarity between omicron and HCoV-229E could have made the former “more accustomed to human hosts” and likely to evade some immune system responses, said Venky Soundararajan, a biological engineer who co-wrote the study.</p> <p>“By virtue of omicron adopting this insertion ... it is essentially taking a leaf out of the seasonal coronaviruses’ page, which [explains] ... how it lives and transmits more efficiently with human beings,” he said.</p> <p>Researchers have established that SARS-CoV-2, which is responsible for the disease known as covid-19, can infect patients who are also afflicted by other coronaviruses. Cells in lungs and gastrointestinal systems could host both types of viruses, said Soundararajan, possibly leading to an exchange in genetic material.</p> <p>The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says health experts are studying how often patients simultaneously suffer from covid and other respiratory illnesses.</p> <p>While much remains unknown about omicron, health experts are worried that its many mutations could make it far more transmissible than variants such as delta. In South Africa, the country’s National Institute for Communicable Diseases said Wednesday that omicron overtook other virus variants in November, accounting for 74 percent of the genomes sequenced last month.</p> <p>Delta had previously been dominant in that country, where daily infection numbers have roughly quadrupled over the past four days. Anthony S. Fauci, the top U.S. infectious-diseases expert, told Bloomberg TV on Friday that it was “comforting but not definitive” that the rapid increase in South Africa’s caseload has not yet been followed by a comparable surge in hospitalizations, adding that there could be a time lag.</p> <p>Nference researchers last year sequenced the novel coronavirus and found that part of its genetic code “mimics” a protein that helps regulate salt and fluid balance in the human body. That development aided efforts to design drugs that combat viral transmission.</p> <p>As a virus evolves to become more transmissible, it generally “loses” traits that are likely to cause severe symptoms, Soundararajan said. But he noted that much more data and analysis of omicron was needed</p>

	<p>before a definitive determination could be made, adding that unequal distribution of vaccines globally could lead to further mutations of the coronavirus.</p> <p>As Fauci warned Friday that there was “absolutely ... community spread” in the United States, President Biden said the country must support global efforts to stop the spread of the coronavirus, especially as new variants emerge, “in order to beat covid” at home.</p> <p>“Look what’s happened. ... We’re starting to make some real progress, and you find out there’s another strain,” Biden added, noting that his administration had shipped millions of vaccines worldwide to people in need.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/04 China space capabilities could outpace US
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/04/politics/american-experts-us-china-space-race/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Gen. David Thompson, vice chief of space operations for the US Space Force, said Saturday China is developing its space capabilities at "twice the rate" of the US.</p> <p>On a panel of US space experts and leaders speaking at the Reagan National Defense Forum in a panel moderated by CNN's Kristin Fisher, Gen. Thompson warned China could overtake the US in space capabilities by the end of the decade.</p> <p>"The fact, that in essence, on average, they are building and fielding and updating their space capabilities at twice the rate we are means that very soon, if we don't start accelerating our development and delivery capabilities, they will exceed us," Gen. Thompson said, adding, "2030 is not an unreasonable estimate."</p> <p>Gen. Thompson was joined by Rep. Jim Cooper, a Tennessee Democrat who chairs the House Armed Services Committee's strategic forces subcommittee, which helps oversee the Space Force's budget, and Chris Kubasik, president and CEO of L3Harris Technologies, a defense contractor that develops Space and Airborne systems.</p> <p>Cooper said, "Hell yes," when asked if the US is competing in a so-called space race with China.</p> <p>Both Gen. Thompson and Kubasik agreed with Cooper's assessment.</p> <p>Cooper has been a steadfast advocate for the Space Force, but said Saturday it is not moving fast enough to "keep up" with private industry.</p> <p>"It's great that the private sector is so much more innovative than our Air Force was, and we need to get the Space Force to be much more innovative and try to keep up with the private sector," Cooper said.</p> <p>He added: "To really be superior, we've got to go beyond Elon Musk's imagination, Jeff Bezos' imagination, beyond their pocketbooks. (The) budget right now is \$17 billion -- that's a lot of money, but considering how crucial space is, are we doing enough?"</p> <p>Cooper suggested the Space Force should be more like the National Reconnaissance Office, which oversees government space satellites and provides satellite intelligence to several US agencies.</p> <p>"The NRO has actually done a pretty amazing job," Cooper said. "They're not as well-known as some other agencies. ... But I had a recent side-by-side briefing with the NRO and Space Force. My conclusion after that briefing was: thank God for the NRO. I anxiously await the day that I can say the same about the Space Force."</p> <p>When asked to respond, Gen. Thompson said, "As Congressman Cooper noted, every time we meet, Congressman Cooper asks what he can continue to do to help, and my request of him is always the same:</p>

	continue to be our strongest supporter and our toughest critic, and I can say this morning he continues to perform effectively in both of those roles," to which the room erupted in laughter.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Seattle settlement Charleena Lyles shooting
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/04/us/charleena-lyles-settlement-police-shooting/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The city of Seattle has agreed to pay \$3.5 million to settle a wrongful-death lawsuit filed on behalf of the family of Charleena Lyles, a pregnant mother of four who was shot and killed in her home by police in 2017.</p> <p>The case was set to go to trial in February 2022, but the settlement was reached on Monday, according to a news release from the lawyers representing Lyles' family and estate.</p> <p>The terms of the settlement include the payment of \$3.5 million and the dismissal of officers Steven McNew and Jason Anderson from the lawsuit within seven days, according to the news release.</p> <p>Both police officers responded to Lyles' apartment in June 2017, after Lyles, 30, called 911 to report a burglary. After an initially calm conversation, the officers said the pregnant mother turned violent, and they shot her after she confronted them with two knives, police said.</p> <p>On the dashcam audio of the shooting, the officers can be heard saying, "get back," repeatedly before shots were heard. The officers performed first aid until the fire department arrived, but Lyles was declared dead at the scene.</p> <p>The dismissal of the remainder of the case against the city now awaits court approval, which "usually takes several months," the release said.</p> <p>"It is indisputable that this has been a tragedy, and we are glad to have some level of closure for the parties," Dan Nolte, a spokesperson for Seattle City Attorney Pete Holmes, said in a statement.</p> <p>"We stand by the multiple layers of review of this event and are pleased that the officers will be dismissed from the lawsuit. The remaining parties will be mutually seeking judicial approval for a resolution of all claims."</p> <p>Attorney Karen Clark, who represents Lyles' children, said "it has been my honor and privilege to represent the best interests of Charleena Lyles' four beautiful children."</p> <p>"I am thankful that the City has settled this case ... her killing should never have happened," Clark continued. "What happened to Charleena in her own home when she called for help -- was a moral outrage. May the City and our community begin the healing process."</p> <p>The shooting</p> <p>On June 18, 2017, shortly before 9 a.m., Lyles called 911 to report a break-in and told the operator that she had been out and that when she returned her door was open and that "there's stuff missing" from her home.</p> <p>Video from her hallway showed Lyles leaving and entering her apartment, but didn't show anyone else going inside her unit.</p> <p>The responding officers, identified as McNew and Anderson, can be heard on a dashcam audio recording discussing the previous interaction Lyles had with law enforcement -- and the fact that she was the subject of an "officer safety caution."</p> <p>They arrived at her apartment knowing of a previous incident she had with police earlier in the month. She had been arrested and charged with obstruction of a public officer and harassment of a law enforcement officer on June 5. That police report described Lyles as having "armed herself with a pair of</p>

extra-long metal shears" and that she had been "threatening the officers." She was released conditionally on June 14.

Dashcam audio reveals that the encounter between the officers and Lyles started calmly. She tells them she left her door unlocked while she went to the store and that while she was out, her Xbox was stolen. The officers ask Lyles if she knew who the suspect could be. She says she has no idea. They take down her contact information and confirm what was stolen.

Seconds later, a commotion is heard. A child cries and Lyles is heard cursing at the officers.

"We need help," an officer says, referring to "a woman with two knives." The officers say "get back" repeatedly, before shots are heard and the audio ends.

Three children were in the apartment at the time of the shooting, police said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 Increases: new cases, Covid deaths
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/05/health/us-coronavirus-sunday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)For the first time in two months, the US is averaging more than 100,000 new Covid-19 cases each day, shortly after millions of Americans traveled for the Thanksgiving holiday.</p> <p>The seven-day moving average of new cases was 121,437 as of Saturday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University (JHU). Prior to this week, the US last topped the 100,000-cases-a-day mark in early October.</p> <p>Also on the rise is the number of Covid-19 deaths, with a seven-day average of 1,651 people dying from the virus each day as of Saturday, the JHU data showed. Average daily deaths haven't been this high in more than a month.</p> <p>The vast majority of new cases in the US continue to be from the Delta variant, but US health officials have detected the new Omicron coronavirus variant in at least 16 states as of Saturday.</p> <p>The first case was found in California on Wednesday, and by the weekend the variant had been identified in 15 other states: Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin.</p> <p>The Omicron variant has been alarming officials because early indications show it could be more contagious than the original strain, and the significant number of mutations it carries poses a potential risk of reducing some of the effectiveness the current vaccines provide. Scientists are working to determine the severity and transmissibility of Omicron -- but that could take weeks, officials have said.</p> <p>Still, the US is more equipped now to deal with the newly detected variant than it was during the onset of the pandemic, US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said Thursday.</p> <p>"We are in such a different place now than we were one year ago because we've learned a lot more. We have vaccines available. We have far more tests available, and what we've got to do to get through this winter is to make sure that we are doubling down on our vaccination strategy," Murthy told CNN.</p> <p>The surgeon general stressed that even though there's a lot to learn about the new variant, mitigation efforts, including masks and hand hygiene combined with physical distancing, remain effective in providing some protection.</p> <p>Just under 60% of the total US population is fully vaccinated and nearly 23% of those have received a booster, according to the latest data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).</p>

	<p>Delta remains the dominate strain in the world</p> <p>While the Omicron variant has the potential to become the dominate strain in the US, the Delta variant continues to show up in 99.9% of coronavirus cases, according to Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC.</p> <p>"We know what we need to do against Delta, and that is get vaccinated, get boosted if you're eligible and continue all of those prevention measures, including masking. And those are very likely to work against the Omicron variant," Walensky told CNN chief medical correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta.</p> <p>The Delta variant managed to take over the entire nation in the early weeks of summer, changing the outlook as vaccines were rolling out and becoming more widely available. The variant continues to rage in hotspots across the country.</p> <p>More than 59,000 Americans are hospitalized with Covid-19, according to data from US Department of Health and Human Services. And overall, hospitalizations have been on the rise for more than three weeks. The World Health Organization said the Delta variant has outcompeted other variants in most countries -- making it the most common strain in much of the world.</p> <p>"Even if the Omicron strain doesn't turn out to be any worse, we are losing close to a thousand people every day from the Delta variant, and that in and of itself is a reason for people to get boosted," Dr. Richard Besser, former acting director of the CDC, told CNN earlier this week.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 India highest Covid death toll since July
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-reports-highest-covid-19-fatalities-since-july-states-update-tallies-2021-12-05/
GIST	<p>MUMBAI, Dec 5 (Reuters) - India on Sunday reported its highest single-day COVID-19 deaths since July after two states revised their death tolls.</p> <p>The eastern state of Bihar added 2,426 unrecorded deaths while the southern state of Kerala added 263 deaths to their tallies on Sunday, a federal health ministry spokesperson told Reuters.</p> <p>The revised figures took single-day deaths to 2,796, the highest since July 21, according to a Reuters tally.</p> <p>A devastating second wave in March and April this year saw thousands of deaths and millions affected.</p> <p>Indian states have continued to add unreported COVID-19 deaths in recent months, lending weight to some medical experts' opinions that such deaths are much higher than the reported number of 473,326.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Study: Indo-Pacific risk of war 'significant'
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/covid-19-curbs-chinas-power-indo-pacific-risks-war-significant-report-2021-12-05/
GIST	<p>MELBOURNE, Dec 5 (Reuters) - The coronavirus pandemic has weakened China's power in the Indo-Pacific, and the region's deepening security uncertainties present a "significant" risk of war, the Lowy Institute said in a report on Sunday.</p> <p>U.S. allies in the region and key balancing powers such as India have never been more dependent on American capacity and willingness to sustain a military and strategic counterweight in response to China's rise, said the Sydney-based foreign policy think tank.</p> <p>At the same time, Beijing has sought to dissuade Southeast Asian countries from joining the U.S. coalition, while upgrading its military exchanges with Russia and Pakistan as well as North Korea and creating as such a formidable trio of China-aligned nuclear-armed powers in the region.</p>

	<p>"Whether the emerging balance of military power contributes to deterrence and strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific is an open question," the report said.</p> <p>"The depth of hostilities, the breadth of U.S.–China competition and the presence of multiple potential flashpoints means the risk of war is significant."</p> <p>The impact from the pandemic has undermined the overall region's prosperity, weakening China's comprehensive power.</p> <p>"Beijing is now less likely to pull ahead of its peer competitor in comprehensive power by the end of the decade – this suggests that there is nothing inevitable about China's rise in the world," the report said. "It appears very unlikely China will ever be as dominant as the United States once was."</p> <p>The think tank said Australia, whose relations with China have deteriorated significantly in recent years, has weathered China's growing power better than most U.S. partners - but is growing more reliant on Washington.</p> <p>In 2018, Australia banned Chinese tech giant Huawei Technologies Co from its 5G telecommunications network. Relations worsened last year when Canberra called for an independent investigation into the origins of the coronavirus, prompting a series of trade reprisals from China.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Drugstores squeezed: staff shortages
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-joe-biden-science-business-health-b02158b1530871161f3c78d0ca915b67
GIST	<p>A rush of vaccine-seeking customers and staff shortages are squeezing drugstores around the U.S., leading to frazzled workers and temporary pharmacy closures.</p> <p>Drugstores are normally busy this time of year with flu shots and other vaccines, but now pharmacists are doling out a growing number of COVID-19 shots and giving coronavirus tests.</p> <p>The push for shots is expected to grow more intense as President Joe Biden urges vaccinated Americans to get booster shots to combat the emerging omicron variant. The White House said Thursday that more than two in three COVID-19 vaccinations are happening at local pharmacies.</p> <p>And pharmacists worry another job might soon be added to their to-do list: If regulators approve antiviral pills from drugmakers Merck and Pfizer to treat COVID-19, pharmacists may be able to diagnose infections and then prescribe pills to customers.</p> <p>"There's crazy increased demand on pharmacies right now," said Theresa Tolle, an independent pharmacist who has seen COVID-19 vaccine demand quadruple since the summer at her Sebastian, Florida, store.</p> <p>Pharmacists say demand for COVID-19 vaccines started picking up over the summer as the delta variant spread rapidly. Booster shots and the expansion of vaccine eligibility to include children have since stoked it.</p> <p>On top of that workload and routine prescriptions, many drugstores also have been asking pharmacists to counsel patients more generally on their health or about chronic conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure.</p> <p>Pharmacies also have been handling more phone calls from customers with questions about vaccines or COVID-19 tests, noted Justin Wilson, who owns three independent pharmacies in Oklahoma.</p>

“We’re all working a lot harder than we did before, but we’re doing everything we can to take care of people,” Wilson said, adding that he has not had to temporarily close any of his pharmacies or limit hours so far.

Tolle said she was lucky to hire a pharmacy resident just before the delta surge arrived. The new employee was supposed to focus mostly on diabetes programs but has largely been relegated to vaccine duty.

Tolle said her Bay Street Pharmacy is now giving about 80 COVID-19 vaccines a day, up from 20 before the delta wave.

“God’s timing worked out well for me,” she said. “We would not have gotten through without having that additional person here.”

Others haven’t been as fortunate. A CVS Health store on the northeast side of Indianapolis shuttered its pharmacy in the middle of the afternoon Thursday due to staffing issues. A sign taped to the metal gate over the closed pharmacy counter also told customers that the pharmacy will soon start closing for a half hour each afternoon so the pharmacist can have a lunch break.

Such temporary closures have ebbed and flowed in pockets around the country throughout the pandemic, but they have grown more acute in recent months, said Anne Burns, a vice president with the American Pharmacists Association.

Pharmacies all need minimum staffing to operate safely, and they sometimes have to close temporarily if they fall below those levels.

Burns said many pharmacies already had relatively thin staffing levels heading into the pandemic, and a wave of pharmacists and pharmacy technicians left after the virus hit.

“There is a lot of stress and burnout for individuals who have been going at this since March of 2020,” she said.

CVS Health spokesman T.J. Crawford said he couldn’t comment on the circumstances for one store. But he said his company continues “to manage through a workforce shortage that isn’t unique to CVS Health.”

Rival drugstore chain Walgreens also has adjusted pharmacy hours “in a limited number of stores,” spokesman Fraser Engerman said.

Both companies are hiring. CVS Health says it has hired 23,000 employees from a push it started in September. About half of that total was pharmacy technicians, who can deliver vaccines.

As companies scramble to hire or keep staff, Burns and Tolle worry about adding even more responsibilities like diagnosing and treating COVID-19.

Tolle noted that it is not clear yet how pharmacists will be reimbursed for the time they take to diagnose and prescribe. That will have to be clarified, especially if cases surge again and drugstores need to add even more workers to help.

“We want to be able to help our communities,” she said. “I don’t know how pharmacies are going to manage it.”

Sherri Brown, a city employee in Omaha, Nebraska, was searching for a vaccine booster dose, but two nearby pharmacies didn’t have appointments available and a third didn’t have the brand she wanted. She wound up getting a shot at a county-run clinic on Friday.

	<p>“I just wanted to protect myself,” said Brown, who suffered through two weeks of coughing, headaches and fatigue when she caught the virus in January, before she was vaccinated. “I guess I’m encouraged to see that people are taking this more seriously.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Brussels: protest against virus restrictions
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/hundreds-march-covid-19-restrictions-belgium-81566685
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- Hundreds of people marched through central Brussels on Sunday to protest tightened COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the Belgian government to counter the latest spike in coronavirus cases.</p> <p>Marchers came to protest the measures that were announced Friday, the third week in a row that the government has tightened its rules as the latest surge in cases strains the country’s health services, depriving people with other life-threatening diseases like cancer of treatment.</p> <p>Shouting “Freedom! Freedom!” and carrying banners that said, “United for our freedom, rights and our children,” people marched to the European Union headquarters. Some also carried signs critical of vaccines and against making the coronavirus shots mandatory.</p> <p>On Friday, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo announced that kindergartens and primary schools will close for the holiday season a week early, and children must now wear masks from the age of 6. Indoor events will only be allowed with a maximum of 200 people.</p> <p>Previously, the government closed nightclubs, and ordered bars and restaurants to shut at 11 p.m. for three weeks. Speculation had been rife that closing times would be brought forward to 8 p.m. but the cabinet decided against it, for now.</p> <p>According to the latest coronavirus figures, the nation of 11 million appears to have reached a plateau.</p> <p>On a weekly average, 17,862 new daily cases were reported, a rise of 6% over the previous week. Hospital admissions rose 4%. More than 3,700 people are in hospital with the virus, 821 of them in intensive care. More than 27,000 people have died since the outbreak began last year.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Saudi coalition Yemen increases air strikes
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/saudi-coalition-yemen-increases-strikes-houthi-rebels-81566618
GIST	<p>CAIRO -- A Saudi-led coalition fighting Iran-backed rebels in Yemen accelerated airstrikes on the capital and elsewhere in the conflict-stricken country in recent weeks, as government forces advanced in the west coast and the key province of Marib, officials said Sunday.</p> <p>The coalition said it hit military facilities in rebel-held Sanaa and launched airstrikes against Houthi front lines in the strategic Marib and Hodeida provinces.</p> <p>Government forces, meanwhile, seized a major district in Hodeida province and other areas on Yemen’s western coast, military officials from both sides said. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief media.</p> <p>The rebels did not immediately comment on government advances in Hodeida. But Houthi-run media reported dozens of airstrikes by the coalition on the rebels in the provinces of Hodeida, Marib, Sanaa, Tazi and Saada.</p> <p>The escalation of fighting in recent weeks comes as the rebels repeatedly push back against diplomatic efforts by the U.N. and U.S. to bring an end to the Houthis' Marib offensive and missile and drone attacks</p>

on Saudi Arabia. The U.N. and U.S. want the Houthis to engage in negotiations to find a settlement to the yearslong conflict in Yemen.

Yemen's war began with the 2014 takeover of Sanaa by the Houthis, who control much of the country's north. The Saudi-led coalition entered the war in 2015, determined to restore the government and oust the rebels. The conflict has since become a regional proxy war that has killed tens of thousands of civilians and fighters. The war also created the world's worst humanitarian crisis, leaving millions suffering from food and medical care shortages and pushing the country to the brink of famine.

The Saudi-led coalition said it launched numerous airstrikes over the past week on Houthi military camps and storehouses for ballistic missiles and explosives-laden drones in Sanaa, the Saudi Press Agency reported.

In Hodeida province, government forces seized control of the district of Hays and a major highway linking the contested port city of Hodeida with the rebel-held capital, according to military officials from both sides.

Abdu Abdullah Magli, a spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces, said forces advanced in the districts of Jabal Raas and Garrahi south of Hodeida city with the support of Saudi-led coalition airstrikes.

The developments come three weeks after pro-government troops known as the Joint Forces redeployed forces from Hodeida, arguing that there was no need for them to stay after the U.N.-brokered cease-fire in 2018 that ended fighting over the coastal city.

The escalation in Hodeida was a setback to the deal that was seen as an important first step toward ending the broader conflict in Yemen, devastated by years of civil war, but was never fully implemented.

In the port city of Mocha on Yemen's western coast, government forces launched their fiercest offensive against the Houthis in the city in years, retaking several nearby towns in the past two weeks, said the officials.

Government forces with the help of coalition airstrikes accelerated their attacks south of Marib province, "reclaiming important and strategic positions" from the Houthis, said Magli, the military spokesman.

He said government forces and tribal fighters also attacked the rebels on the southern front line in Marib province, leaving dozens of Houthis dead and wounded.

The rebels have for months attempted to take oil-rich city of Marib to complete their control over the northern half of Yemen before engaging in settlement talks. The Houthis have also escalated cross-border attacks by ballistic missiles and explosive laden drones on Saudi Arabia.

The Houthi offensive on Marib has worsened the already dire situation in the province and sent waves of newly displaced persons to crowded camps on the outskirts of the city of Marib in recent weeks. The province's 137 displacement camps have seen a nearly 10-fold increase in new arrivals since September, according to the U.N. migration agency.

The International Organization for Migration said last month that more than 45,000 people in Marib province have been forced to leave their homes since September, including many for the fourth or fifth time since the beginning of Yemen's war.

"IOM is extremely concerned about the prospect that hundreds of thousands of people might be forced to move again if violence reaches the city, as well as rising civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure," said Christa Rottensteiner, the migration agency's chief in Yemen.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/indian-villagers-protest-army-kills-13-fearing-rebels-81565200
GIST	<p>GAUHATI, India -- Angry villagers burned army vehicles in protest after more than a dozen people were killed by soldiers who mistakenly believed some of them were militants in India's remote northeast region along the border with Myanmar, officials said Sunday.</p> <p>Nagaland state's top elected official Neiphiu Rio ordered a probe into the killings, which occurred on Saturday. He tweeted, "The unfortunate incident leading to the killing of civilians at Oting is highly condemnable."</p> <p>An army officer said the soldiers fired at a truck after receiving intelligence about a movement of insurgents in the area and killed six people. As irate villagers burned two army vehicles, the soldiers fired at them, killing nine more people, the officer said on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to talk to reporters.</p> <p>One soldier was also killed in the clash with protesters, he said.</p> <p>An Indian army statement said it "deeply regretted" the incident and its aftermath, adding that "the cause of the unfortunate loss of lives is being investigated at the highest level and appropriate action will be taken as per the course of law."</p> <p>"Security forces have suffered severe injuries in the incident, including one soldier who succumbed to the injuries," it added.</p> <p>The statement said "credible intelligence" on insurgent movements indicated that a "specific operation was planned" in Mon district in Nagaland.</p> <p>Insurgents often cross into Myanmar after attacking Indian government forces in the remote area.</p> <p>Nyamtow Konyak, a local community leader, said those killed were coal miners.</p> <p>India's Home Minister Amit Shah expressed anguish over the "unfortunate incident" and said the state government will investigate the killings.</p> <p>The army officer said the soldiers had laid an ambush for a week following intelligence that insurgents were planning to attack soldiers in the area, 400 kilometers (250 miles) east of Gauhati, the capital of Assam state.</p> <p>Government forces are battling dozens of ethnic insurgent groups in India's remote northeast whose demands range from independent homelands to maximum autonomy within India.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Food insecurity persists; communities act
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/food-insecurity-persists-forcing-community-organizers-act/story?id=81277890
GIST	<p>As families gather across the country to celebrate the holidays, many are struggling to fill their kitchens with fresh food and groceries.</p> <p>The U.S. has made virtually no progress toward solving this issue of food insecurity in the last two years, according to United States Department of Agriculture data. More than 10% of U.S. households (13.8 million) were food insecure at some time during 2020, unchanged from 2019, the government said.</p> <p>This problem has particularly hit Black and brown communities hard.</p> <p>During the pandemic, residents in Harlem, New York, leaned on local organizations like New York City's The Brotherhood Sister Sol for resources, guidance and food. The group has taken matters of food</p>

insecurity into its own hands with a weekly grocery distribution that feeds more than 500 families in the neighborhood.

The organization says it's on track to distribute more than 1 million meals by the end of 2021.

"Each and every week, families just express immense relief at the fact that BroSis continues to support them in these ways," said Brittany Reyes, Sister Sol coordinator at BroSis.

The organization handed out turkeys and holiday favorites over Thanksgiving week but community members are dependent year-round on others for food. In New York City alone, about 19% live in poverty, according to [the city](#).

Khary Lazarre-White, BroSis co-founder and executive director, said, "This is a community that's still desperately in need because of a lack of investment in communities like Harlem and the South Bronx." Food insecurity means that families have insufficient funds and resources to provide adequate food for their household throughout the year.

About 4 in 10 households with Hispanic/Latinx or Black parents reported food insecurity, according to [a 2020 study from the Urban Institute](#), an economic and social policy think tank. That's almost triple what households with white parents reported.

Food insecurity is a symptom of larger systemic issues like poverty, said Elaine Waxman, a senior fellow at Urban Institute. Low-income families are often forced to trade off different kinds of necessities and expenses, sometimes leaving food off the table.

Not having consistent access to healthy food or stable food sources can have long-term effects on [one's health and well-being](#), especially for children and adolescents who rely on food for their developmental growth, health experts say.

"It's really important to frame food insecurity as a public health issue," Waxman said.

People who are food insecure are more likely to [have chronic diet-related diseases](#) and are likely less able to manage it, according to research by the USDA. The study also showed that food insecurity is also often associated with cognitive delays and behavioral challenges in children and adolescents.

"We're probably the wealthiest country in the history in recorded history, yet we have food insecurity [at a level] that is just incredibly alarming," said Luis Guardia, the president of the Food Research and Action Center, a national nonprofit research organization working to eradicate poverty.

Several tools that Guardia calls the "country's first line of defense against hunger" have been proven to reduce hunger. The federal government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program allows impoverished families to purchase food in authorized grocery stores. National school meal programs help feed children while they're at school throughout the day -- a system that proved to be critical during the pandemic when schools shut down.

Waxman and Guardia, however, said these programs still have their flaws and are in need of expansion. SNAP benefits are inadequate compared to local food prices in some locations and some Americans earn just above the income required to attain these benefits.

"What we need is the political will," said Guardia. "There really shouldn't be any excuse for anyone to go hungry in this country." But the expansion of these programs throughout the pandemic helped keep the country on track during a period where it would have been expected to implode, Waxman said.

"The problem is that we don't lean into these problems long term," Waxman said. "We have that short Band-Aid kind of approach. My concern is that while the overall unemployment rate is improving, it's not that way for everyone and yet, we're already pulling back all kinds of systems."

She went on, "Will we learn lessons from the pandemic and know that we can actually make a significant difference?"

Food insecurity experts and the organizers at BroSis concede that grassroots food distribution efforts and pantries aren't permanent solutions to the problem.

"We have a tendency sometimes to assume the charitable food system will just sort of pick up all the pieces -- and they've done a heroic job during the pandemic -- but that's supposed to be a workaround," Waxman said. "It shouldn't be a primary safety net for anyone."

Added Lazarre-White: "The only entity that can respond to the level of inequality that produces food insecurity and hunger in our country is government. No private philanthropy can do that. Certainly no independent nonprofit can do that."

For now, BroSis will continue to fill the gaps -- showing up every Wednesday to feed the families who rely on them.

"So I think what we have to do is frame this work as justice work," said Lazarre-White. "The issue of basic rights, of housing, of education and food -- these are things that are human rights."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Study: most vaccines work as boosters
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/03/covid-vaccines-booster-combinations-study/
GIST	<p>LONDON — Most vaccines are safe to use as boosters and give people more immunity against the coronavirus, according to a new study of seven of them.</p> <p>The mRNA vaccines by pharmaceutical giants Pfizer, with partner BioNTech, and Moderna appeared to give the highest boost of antibodies 28 days after the extra dose, although other vaccines in the study may take more time to build up better immunity.</p> <p>After the United States endorsed “mix-and-match” boosters, the Biden administration is now encouraging more people to get extra doses as scientists race to understand the newly identified omicron variant, which has spurred many countries to tighten restrictions.</p> <p>The new research on safety and immune response, published Thursday in British journal the Lancet, looks at how to “optimize selection of booster vaccines” by examining people who initially took two doses of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. The United States has not authorized the Oxford-AstraZeneca shot.</p> <p>The immunized participants got a range of boosters, including the experimental shot from the company CureVac that was pulled after less effective results. The others included Johnson & Johnson, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech, as well as the Novavax and Valneva vaccines, which are under review in Europe.</p> <p>Side effects included fatigue and headache, but serious reactions were not common with any of the boosters, the report said.</p> <p>The research, led by scientists at the University of Southampton, measured responses that can help predict the level of immunity, such as higher antibody levels and the creation of T cells.</p> <p>Almost all the vaccines in the study bolstered those responses regardless of the initial doses, it said. One exception was the combination of a booster dose of Valneva in people who had first received Pfizer-BioNTech shots, which did not meet benchmarks for a “clinically important difference.”</p>

All seven vaccine boosters appeared to offer more immunity after two AstraZeneca doses, and six were effective after two Pfizer-BioNTech shots, “with no safety concerns” though with varying results, according to the researchers.

While the two mRNA vaccines produced the biggest antibody boost at 28 days, “the vaccines work in different ways,” infectious-diseases professor Saul Faust of Britain’s National Institute for Health Research, [who led the trial](#), told The Washington Post on Friday. “The other vaccines are ... still a massive boost compared to what was already protecting us,” he said.

The researchers noted that more work will be necessary as well to understand the relationship between immune response after coronavirus vaccines and longer-term protection against disease.

Britain has expanded its rollout of boosters, offering all adults the prospect of an extra dose, as biotech firms examine how their existing vaccines fight the latest variant and how to adapt.

The spread of omicron has raised more warnings about vaccine inequity around the world, with many people in poorer countries yet to receive their first shot.

“We’ve got just as much responsibility” to overcome hesitancy in many countries and get enough vaccines to people who have less access, Faust said. The latest findings also show that “countries can reach for what they have available,” he said.

To help with vaccine supplies, the study suggests that half a dose of Pfizer-BioNTech could have an effective response as a booster. The message behind the mRNA vaccines quickly producing a high antibody level “is that we might be able to boost more people with the same amount of vaccines in the future,” he added. “It’s exciting for global deployment that we might be able to reduce the dose and get just as good immunity.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 NKorea heads into ‘tense’ winter
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-food-winter-kim/2021/12/04/a89dc828-4248-11ec-9404-50a28a88b9cd_story.html
GIST	<p>SEOUL — North Korea’s self-imposed border lockdown during the pandemic has exacerbated a shortage of food, supplies and cash, hurting the country’s most vulnerable people as they hunker down for the winter ahead.</p> <p>Winter is typically a volatile time in North Korea, which struggles with chronic food shortages. What makes this year especially concerning, say analysts who follow North Korea, is the country’s closure of its borders since early 2020, even with critical trading partner China.</p> <p>At the same time, the North’s leader, Kim Jong Un, has imposed new measures that have further restricted internal economic activity even as his government has kept up military advancement and test launches of missiles.</p> <p>It is impossible to know the full scope of issues affecting North Korea, a totalitarian state that issues carefully controlled and choreographed propaganda.</p> <p>But according to statements in state media, limited trade data and accounts of informants and defectors, which cannot be independently confirmed, the pandemic lockdown has devastated the domestic economy and access to food.</p> <p>Kim has emphasized self-reliance during the prolonged food crisis as the country retreats further inward. That posture also creates challenges for those seeking to reengage North Korea in denuclearization talks that have stalled for nearly three years.</p>

There are signs that North Korea may be looking to reopen its border with China. But the prospects for bringing Kim back to negotiations remain slim, especially as the Biden administration has shown no signs that it is willing to grant the sanctions relief that Kim demands.

Urging North Korea to reopen its economy gradually, U.N. Special Rapporteur Tomás Ojea Quintana [wrote in an October report](#): “People’s access to food is a serious concern and the most vulnerable children and elderly are at risk of starvation.”

Despite some flood damage this summer, analysts anticipate that the crop yield this fall was not severely affected by bad weather. Still, the overall food shortage persists, and even international aid groups have left the country during the lockdown.

The lack of imported fertilizers and farming materials, such as vinyl to cover the crops, has led to a lesser-than-anticipated harvest, according to Lee Sang-yong, editor in chief of Daily NK, a Seoul-based news service with informants inside North Korea.

The price of corn has been rising in the pandemic, a sign that more people are mixing corn with rice, or eating corn in lieu of rice, which is more difficult to obtain, Lee said.

“There are all sorts of effects because of this massive reduction of trade,” said Sokeel Park, South Korea country director of the nongovernmental organization Liberty in North Korea, which helps North Koreans resettle in the South.

In June, Kim called the country’s food situation “[tense](#).” In late October, North Korea announced its plans to breed black swan as a way to make up for its inefficient farming sector and food shortage, saying the meat “[is delicious and has medicinal value](#).” A senior official of the Workers’ Party of Korea led a ceremony opening a black swan center at a duck farm.

Swans are not known to be particular delicacies, and some analysts say that such efforts are shortsighted solutions being tried in place of systemic improvements to the economy. North Korea has a history of promoting exotic animals as innovative food solutions. [Ostrich farms were built](#) after the deadly famine of the 1990s, an ordeal known as the “arduous march.”

Low levels of trade have persisted, and there are some signs that North Korea is taking steps to resume land-based trade with China, according to South Korean intelligence officials. For decades, Beijing has been an economic lifeline for North Korea.

North Korea imported about 1 million tons of grains, wheat and rice in the past year to supplement its production, according to a [quarterly report](#) by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization issued Dec. 2.

“North Korea went out of the way to stabilize food prices amid the disastrous economy. The rice price was stable on the surface because of heavy state interventions ... and unofficial receipt of Chinese aids. However, we do not know for how much longer it can hold,” said Cho Han-bum, a senior researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification, a government-funded think tank in Seoul.

With the concerns over new coronavirus variants and [lack of vaccines](#), North Korea may not fully resume trade until after the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing in February, Cho said, calling the possible delay “a hopeless scenario for the North Korean people.”

How much the coronavirus has affected North Korea is unclear. The country maintains that it has had no positive cases, but it has taken more drastic measures than were adopted during previous epidemic outbreaks.

North Koreans developed their own ways to endure long periods of difficulty after the 1990s famine. Since then, local markets called “jangmadang” have opened and operate under state watch, with citizens being allowed to sell and trade goods and food.

But the shortage of imports and supplies has in turn limited the availability of food and other necessities such as medicines and batteries at the markets.

Urban residents are reliant on the markets and have hit worse by the lockdown than have those in rural areas, who can farm their own food and sell and barter agricultural products, said Jiro Ishimaru, the founder of the Japan-based news service Asia Press Rimjingang, which has informants inside North Korea.

“Those who are having the most difficult time and dying of starvation are dying because they have no money, not because there is no rice growing inside the country,” Ishimaru said.

The trade blockade is likely also to have caused price inflation in the markets and a shortage of domestic and foreign currency for buying goods, said Peter Ward, a Seoul-based specialist on the North Korean economy.

“They will have more-volatile prices, food prices will be more inflated there, people may be struggling to acquire [goods] and lost purchasing power as a result of covid and anti-market measures, and they might be struggling to feed themselves,” Ward said.

The lack of access to medication at the markets has made it difficult to treat pneumonia and other cold-weather ailments as winter approaches, Ishimaru said, adding that the shortage has hurt the elderly and caretakers who have lost jobs and now cannot provide care.

Intensifying crackdowns on people moving between provinces and the illegal use of cellphones have severely limited people’s ability to trade food and goods. Even defectors who have regularly sent remittances back into North Korea are finding it difficult to reach their families or are running into more scam brokers who pocket the money themselves.

“The North Koreans who are here [in the South], a lot of them have lost contact with family members, or it’s more difficult for them to ... send money,” said Park, of Liberty in North Korea, the group helping defectors.

The halted trade and ban on travel between provinces also led to unemployment for the workers who relied on the shipment of goods from the North Korea-China border to other parts of the country, including operators of trucks and hand wagons, and those who cooked food for the workers and delivered goods to markets.

“It’s not a simple food shortage issue, but an economic issue,” Ishimaru said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Scientists race to understand omicron
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/04/omicron-variant-how-bad/
GIST	<p>Microbiologist Pei-Yong Shi has studied all the variants: alpha, beta, gamma, delta, “delta-plus,” lambda and mu. So he was ready for omicron, the variant that incited global anxiety unlike any of the variants that came before.</p> <p>Like most scientists, he was shocked by the sheer number of mutations. He also knew exactly what to do next.</p> <p>Shi runs a high-containment laboratory at the University of Texas Medical Branch, in Galveston, and collaborates closely with Pfizer. Over Thanksgiving, his team began engineering a replica of the new variant to test against the antibodies generated by vaccines. But it doesn’t happen overnight: It will take about two weeks to build the omicron replica, another few days to confirm that it’s an accurate facsimile, and one more week to pit the virus against blood samples from vaccinated people.</p>

Shi and colleagues around the world are in an urgent race to gauge the danger posed by omicron, which is rapidly seeding itself everywhere. As the tally of cases mounts, what happens inside labs over the next few weeks will help scientists determine the true potential of the virus, tipping off government officials and pharmaceutical companies about whether they need to revise their global vaccination campaign.

His message: Be patient. Wait for the data.

“I think there is a lot of overreaction, and we just have to sit tight,” Shi said. “There are no results yet, these are just the mutations. What does that mean? We have to see.”

There’s no doubt that omicron is different — and worrisome. It is [riddled with mutations](#), some known to help the coronavirus dodge the body’s immune defenses. Others are newcomers, a complete mystery. Omicron has more than 30 genetic changes in the coronavirus spike where vaccines train their firepower.

But the scientific community is focused, not freaked out — perhaps because it has [seen this movie before](#): A new [variant pops up](#), and everyone on the planet is desperate to know [how bad it is](#). Science ensues.

First, researchers will test how well the virus is equipped to [dodge current vaccines](#). At the same time, they will watch closely what happens in the real world. Most scientists are betting omicron will have some capacity to slip past the virus-blocking antibodies that form a primary line of defense — but no one knows yet how deft an escape artist it will turn out to be. Many also believe vaccines are likely to retain a level of protection, particularly against severe illness.

Even the worst-case omicron possibility — [faster-than-delta transmission](#), a sharp erosion in the protection afforded by vaccines and higher rates of severe disease — isn’t a hopeless scenario.

Companies will reboot omicron-specific vaccines and test them. Vaccine-makers have already begun adapting their vaccines as a precaution, and even ran a dress rehearsal of this strategy earlier this year, against the beta variant.

Omicron is still studded with question marks. Does it, as some preliminary data from [South Africa](#) suggest, spread more easily than delta? Can it evade the multiple lines of defense mustered by vaccines? Is it more pathogenic — capable of causing severe disease?

“Working on it! No data yet!” Penny Moore, the scientist whose laboratory in South Africa first revealed the immune-evading potential of the beta variant, wrote in an email. “We have to create the spike by introducing the many mutations, or grow the live virus.”

Matthew B. Frieman, a coronavirus expert at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, hopes samples of the virus will arrive in the next week so he can start experiments in lab dishes and vaccinated mice. Many people, including him, had shared the hope that as [vaccine eligibility was expanded to younger children](#), it might be a last steppingstone before resuming more normal life.

Instead, his Thanksgiving was interrupted by phone calls and Zoom meetings, continuing a relentless pace of work with [few slow periods since January 2020](#).

“There is an urgency to know, but it’s been urgent for two years,” Frieman said. “The good thing is, we know what to do. We’ve been planning for this, and we know the science to do. We know what assays work and how to do them. We have mice vaccinated and ready to be infected.”

Speculation that coronavirus vaccines could falter against omicron has sent tremors through financial markets and concern through a pandemic-weary public wondering whether [Christmas is canceled or travel plans need to be rescheduled](#). Most experts are measured.

“We’re in a position of gathering data,” said John Mascola, director of the National Institutes of Health’s Vaccine Research Center. “The virus has proved to us that it has an uncanny ability to evolve rapidly, and it has the ability to change in a way that dramatically changes the variant that is predominant in the world.”

But will omicron usurp delta, just as delta took over from alpha?

“We need about two more weeks” to see laboratory data and what the virus does on the ground, Mascola said.

Scientists do know the path to answers. They’ve walked it many times during this pandemic. If they decide [a revised shot is necessary](#) — far from certain at this point — the process will take about three months for the messenger RNA shots.

“This is essentially the same drill, as I call it, that we are always using. We stay very ... levelheaded about it,” said Kathrin U. Jansen, Pfizer’s head of vaccine research and development. “What we are seeing right now is everyone is afraid of the [unknown](#). ... What I think, as a scientist, is that what’s unknown, we don’t address that with fear, but with studying that and getting the data.”

The Texas scientists, clad head-to-toe in protective gear, work in secure biosafety laboratories. They start with the original strain of coronavirus, the virus isolated in Snohomish County, Wash., nearly two years ago. They synthesize the omicron spike gene, with its dozens of mutations. Using the original virus as a scaffold, they swap in the new spike — [steps they’ve done](#) for alpha, beta, gamma, delta — and now omicron.

Once the virus is ready, the Texas researchers will test it against a panel of 20 antibody-rich blood samples taken from people fully vaccinated with the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine. This will tell them how good the virus is at evading this key line of immune defense and allow them to compare it to other variants.

Other labs are working on similar experiments with blood from vaccinated patients, including those who have received booster shots.

Mehul Suthar, an immunologist at Emory University, is eager to study omicron itself in his high-containment laboratory, where he typically dilutes a vaccinated patient’s blood in stages to see at what point a variant is able to break through the antibodies and infect cells.

“We’re all scrambling to get ahold of the virus,” Suthar said.

Other laboratories don’t experiment with the virus itself, but instead create pseudoviruses — a version that superficially looks like the variant, and is capable of infecting an individual cell in lab experiments, but that is designed to be incapable of replicating. These pseudoviruses carry the spike protein of the variant but are easier to work with because they don’t require layers of protective gear and biocontainment laboratories.

Collectively, those tests will show how much antibody protection drops against omicron. If it’s a big enough reduction, vaccine-makers may decide to reboot their shots with new genetic sequences that match the changes in omicron’s spikes. They’re already laying the groundwork.

But that is only one line of evidence. Omicron’s true threat will be revealed not only by what it does in a laboratory dish, but also by what it does outside the lab.

A [preprint study from South African scientists](#), for example, found evidence that people previously infected with the coronavirus may not have much of a shield against omicron, with reinfections three times likelier than during previous outbreaks. The paper did not shed light on how severe reinfections were or

whether vaccinated people were more likely to experience breakthrough infections when exposed to omicron compared with their response to other variants.

“It’s going to be a deluge of unfiltered information — press releases, preprint servers, some people making opinions, but I think the scientific community has definitely engaged very quickly, so hopefully a scientific consensus will emerge,” said Dan H. Barouch, director of the Center for Virology and Vaccine Research at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston.

“To some extent, it’s: Here we go again, we have another job to do,” said Barouch, who helped develop the [Johnson & Johnson vaccine](#).

Scientists debate how well omicron’s ensemble of mutations will help it get around immune defenses. But most agree that even if it barrels through that key line of defense, it won’t zero out the protection from vaccines.

“We are no longer a blank slate. We have preexisting immunity, even though it may not be perfectly matched,” said Barney Graham, a key architect of the coronavirus vaccines, who recently retired from the National Institutes of Health.

Previous variants already taught that lesson. The beta variant posed a clear threat to immune protection in a dish. But clinical trials of the [Johnson & Johnson](#) and [Pfizer-BioNTech](#) vaccines showed they still offered protection to people.

Although it is difficult to predict from a virus’s mutations how it will act, many scientists say they think omicron may ultimately require a revised vaccine.

“At this point, the wise thing to do is to start the early steps for making a booster against this variant,” said Jesse Bloom, an expert on viral evolution at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle.

The major vaccine companies are at work doing that, just in case. Pfizer and [BioNTech](#) have announced that adapting their vaccine will take six weeks and that the first batches could be shipped within 100 days. Moderna is [formulating an omicron-specific candidate](#), a process that typically takes 60 to 90 days based on its experience doing so against beta and delta. Johnson & Johnson is pursuing an omicron-specific shot.

Instead of running time-consuming large-scale trials that depend on waiting for people to get ill, vaccine-makers expect to be able to show that their revamped vaccines are safe and effective by measuring immune responses in blood samples taken from study participants.

“We can turn the key relatively quickly and start to produce the updated vaccine,” Pfizer’s Jansen said.

This could also be the moment for [second-generation vaccines](#) designed to be variant-proof by triggering a broader swath of immunity beyond antibodies.

“Our premise was that this would happen,” said Andrew Allen, chief executive of Gritstone Bio, a company whose vaccine formula is designed to rouse protection from T cells, the immune-system warriors that kill infected cells. “It is naive to think that the very first vaccine we made in the very first hot minutes of the pandemic would be the very best vaccine we could make.”

The idea behind Gritstone’s vaccine is that a broader set of immune defenses will free the world from constantly trying to play catch-up to the latest mutant strain of the virus.

But unless more of the world becomes vaccinated, the frenzy of worry is likely to continue to repeat.

“If we don’t develop systems to immunize the whole world in three months, instead of three years, we are not going to be successful against these kind of pandemic threats,” Graham said. “Because viruses adapt

	and they change, and unless we develop generalized global immunity more readily, we will always be faced with chasing our tail.”
Return to Top	
HEADLINE	12/04 Syria's Assad tightens grip
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/assad-syria-business-government/?itid=hp-top-table-main
GIST	<p>The five Syrians pulled from their homes by secret police on the same night last year were not insurgents, spies or suspected of being disloyal to the country's president, Bashar al-Assad.</p> <p>Instead, they were targets in a desperate new phase of Assad's battle to survive: the hunt for cash.</p> <p>All five were executives at Syria's second-largest cellphone company, MTN Syria, according to individuals familiar with the episode. Their arrests were part of a ruthless campaign by the president to seize MTN's assets, along with almost every other meaningful source of revenue in Syria's shattered economy.</p> <p>MTN was ultimately brought to its knees four months ago after protracted pressure in which those arrests were followed by demands for multimillion-dollar payments, threats to revoke the company's operating license and a dubious court ruling that put an Assad loyalist in charge of the company.</p> <p>The South Africa-based corporation announced in August that it was abandoning the Syrian market under conditions that its chief executive called “intolerable.” MTN's cellphone towers are still working, its 6 million subscribers still paying their monthly bills.</p> <p>“But where that money is going, no one knows,” said a Syrian executive who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation. “Honestly, no one knows.”</p> <p>Similar events have played out repeatedly over the past two years, as Assad and his financially strapped regime have raided or outright seized dozens of businesses, including foreign corporations and family enterprises that rode out Syria's decade-long war in government-held territory, according to U.S. and other Western officials, as well as Syrians with firsthand knowledge of the regime's actions. Neither the Syrian government nor the Syrian presidency responded to requests for comment.</p> <p>Companies that had survived the war have been raided by teams of regime “auditors” and agents, who scour their accounts for supposed tax and customs violations or other pretexts for hefty fines. Business leaders who stuck by Assad have been detained and pressured to cough up money to supposed charities that are widely seen as Assad slush funds.</p> <p>The moves are part of what one Dubai-based Syrian executive called a “mafia-style money grab.”</p> <p>The most brazen cases amount to corporate decapitations in which top executives are forced out under duress and replaced by Assad loyalists. Among them is a relative newcomer, Yasar Ibrahim, who in a two-year stretch has acquired control of MTN and other Assad-targeted companies.</p> <p>Even members of the Assad family have not been spared. Last year, Assad stripped his cousin Rami Makhoul of companies and assets that had once been part of a massive portfolio estimated by Syria experts to be worth as much as \$10 billion.</p> <p>The regime's campaign to commandeer wealth has only intensified since then. U.S. officials and Syria experts said it has been driven by the intense financial pressure on a regime that has been bankrupted by war, daunting debts to Iran and Russia, a meltdown in neighboring Lebanon's financial sector and continuing economic sanctions from the West.</p>

Assad needs the money, officials and experts said, to meet payroll for his military and security services, to buy fuel and food for the capital and other areas still under regime control, and to reward some Syrian elites who remained loyal to him through the war.

Against this backdrop, an endgame has begun to unfold. U.S. officials and Syria experts said that Assad has so effectively consolidated his control over the country's security apparatus and economy that he is poised to emerge from the war with a firmer grip on power than when it started. But after a decade of conflict, he is left in charge of a dismembered and decimated state where nearly half of Syria's territory is beyond his government's reach, entire towns lie in ruins and the currency has lost 85 percent of its value since the start of the war.

"In an era of a shrinking economic pie, the fight for resources becomes even more ferocious," said Robert Ford, who served as U.S. ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014. The climate of desperation "actually gives Assad even more leverage," Ford said, because so few potential rivals have the wherewithal, financial or otherwise, "to contest Assad's control."

Assad has portrayed the asset seizures as part of his promised fight against corruption. "There will not be any suspension to this process or leniency with any person involved because ... ending [corruption] is an economic, social and patriotic necessity," he said at a ceremony in July marking his inauguration to a fourth seven-year presidential term.

And Ammar Waqqaf, a Britain-based Syrian businessman who supports the Syrian government, said that the targeted executives "are beneficiaries of privileges not open to the ordinary people. The state sees justice in getting them to pay more."

But the outcome adds to the bitter legacy of the Arab Spring, which had raised hopes of political reform across the Middle East and expanded economic opportunity. In Syria, the opposite has happened. Assad and his shrunken inner circle have found ways to cling to power and maintain aspects of their elite lifestyles, while much of the rest of the population faces a deepening humanitarian crisis.

More than 90 percent of Syrians now live in poverty, according to the United Nations. Many of the country's hospitals, schools and roads outside Damascus have been reduced to rubble. And drought has raised fears of famine, with humanitarian groups estimating that 12 million Syrians' access to adequate food is at risk.

The United Nations has estimated that rebuilding Syria [will cost at least \\$250 billion](#). U.S. sanctions are already a major barrier to foreign investment, and the Biden administration has signaled they will remain in place until Assad agrees to substantial political reforms.

The treatment of MTN and others may further undermine the prospects of any money flowing into Syria. "No sane and rational foreign investor would think of doing anything in Syria under the current operating environment," said the executive who described the assault on MTN.

A longtime kleptocracy

The mafia-like elements of Assad's strategy go beyond the seizures of companies.

The Syrian regime has also become an alleged drug trafficker, accused by U.S. and Western officials of producing mass quantities of the amphetamine Captagon at facilities in loyalist areas along Syria's coast.

In 2020, European and Arab authorities [seized shipments with an estimated street value of \\$3.4 billion](#) — more than Syria's annual budget — according to the Center for Operational Analysis and Research, a global risk and development consultancy.

The regime is also accused of diverting tens of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid intended for impoverished Syrians.

A recent study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, for instance, documented how the Assad government has pocketed more than half of every dollar brought into the country by aid organizations — charging what CSIS said were artificially inflated exchange rates for Syrian pounds that aid groups need to buy supplies and operate. The Syrian central bank diverted at least \$100 million between 2019 and 2020, [CSIS concluded](#), by accepting dollars from aid groups and returning Syrian currency at a fraction of its worth on the open market.

Even before the war, Syria was widely perceived as a kleptocratic country in which the Assad family enriched itself by exploiting access to state-controlled assets and imposing parasitic partnerships on businesses.

But that approach has been upended dramatically over the past two years, as Assad turned on formerly trusted insiders and abandoned any pretense of entrepreneurial partnership.

Among the main targets has been the telecommunications industry, a singularly reliable source of revenue in a country where the poorest Syrians often carry cellphones even if they can't count on reliable access to electricity or clean water.

Pressure on cellphone companies

The regime began targeting companies on the periphery of the industry as early as 2018, according to Syrians with direct knowledge of the matter.

In one early case, a company that provided support services to the country's main cellular carriers was told that its clients would sever their contracts unless the smaller firm's owners relinquished control.

The company had more than 200 employees and revenue of several million dollars each year, according to a Syrian executive knowledgeable about the episode. Senior managers were encouraged to stay, and the business continued to operate largely as it had for years. But the company's contracts were taken over by a new entity, Al-Burj Investment Company, the executive said. Al-Burj was controlled by Ibrahim, a financier and businessman who has gained favor with Assad in recent years. Ibrahim's sister Nasreen was listed on corporate records as an Al-Burj executive, according to Syrian individuals familiar with the case.

"We were hoping to be one day be part of the new Syria — to be part of the reconstruction and that this regime would not be there," said an executive with knowledge of the takeover. "We no longer have any hope of going back." The executive spoke on the condition of anonymity and asked that the name of the company not be published, saying that relatives and employees still in Syria remain vulnerable.

The Assad regime soon shifted its attention to larger corporations that dominate the cellphone business. MTN had entered the market in 2008 with the acquisition of a company that had been started by a Lebanese businessman, Najib Mikati, who is now Lebanon's prime minister. MTN invested heavily and came to hold roughly 45 percent of the Syrian cellphone market.

Then, in late 2019, the company was informed by Syria's main telecommunications regulatory agency that the 20-year license it had acquired just four years earlier would be canceled without an additional payment of \$40 million. When MTN balked, regime pressure intensified, a second Syrian executive said.

In May of last year, the company executives were arrested. These five top employees, including four men and one woman, were detained in simultaneous 2 a.m. raids and taken to a prison run by the internal security branch of Syria's General Intelligence Directorate, according to Syrians familiar with the case. A sixth employee was taken into custody the next day from his office in Damascus.

The employees included MTN's senior managers in Syria, but not its chief executive, who had left the country earlier in the year. The arrested executives were interrogated for nearly three weeks and faced threats to themselves and their families before being released, Syrian individuals said.

“The main purpose was not to get information,” one person familiar with the case said. “It was a message being sent.”

MTN began negotiating to sell its 75 percent stake in its Syria operation to a company called TeleInvest that was controlled by Ibrahim, the Assad associate, who had previously acquired the other 25 percent from a Saudi investor.

But the deal with TeleInvest was delayed by concerns about Ibrahim’s ability to secure the money for the transaction, an executive said, and then collapsed when the United States imposed sanctions on Ibrahim in mid-2020. The Treasury Department [referred to Ibrahim](#) as Assad’s “henchman” and said that “using his networks across the Middle East and beyond, Ibrahim has cut corrupt deals that enrich Assad, while Syrians are dying from a lack of food and medicine.”

MTN, which operates in 21 countries across Africa and the Middle East, worried that it might face U.S. financial penalties if it were caught doing business with the sanctioned Syrian, the executive said.

When the deal fell through, Assad’s government moved to seize control of MTN through different tactics. In a lawsuit, Syria’s regulatory agency accused MTN of violating the terms of its license, tax evasion and other charges, and secured a ruling that put the company under control of a court-appointed guardian.

The company disputed the allegations and challenged the ruling in court in Syria but lost that case. An MTN spokesman in South Africa said that the company “declines to comment any further on this issue.” The court then handed that role as guardian to TeleInvest, the same Ibrahim-controlled company that had tried and failed to negotiate a purchase of MTN.

The South African company surrendered, bowing out of a business that had generated nearly \$1 billion in annual revenue before the war, though earnings had contracted significantly during the conflict. The company still had 6 million subscribers when chief executive Ralph Mupita declared in August that [MTN would “abandon” its business in Syria](#) after having “lost control of the operations through what we feel was an unjust action.”

Dismantling a cousin’s empire

While still stalking MTN, Assad orchestrated a more audacious takedown within his own family.

Rami Makhlouf is the scion of an elite clan that Assad’s father — Syria’s longtime leader Hafez al-Assad — married into. With virtual free rein over the country’s economy for nearly two decades, Makhlouf used his influence to build an empire reputed to be worth billions, though it was widely suspected that he was holding much of that wealth on behalf of his cousin, the president.

Makhlouf’s most valuable asset was Syriatel, the dominant mobile phone carrier in the country, though he also held lucrative stakes in Syria’s oil, banking and real estate sectors.

Makhlouf’s exploitation of state power was so conspicuous that he was put under U.S. sanctions years before the civil war broke out, accused of having “manipulated the Syrian judicial system and used Syrian intelligence officials to intimidate his business rivals.” The [U.S. Treasury Department in 2008](#) called Makhlouf “one of the primary centers of corruption in Syria.”

Last year, Assad began publicly denouncing his profligate cousin in terms similar to those used by the U.S. Treasury.

The attacks on Makhlouf came as Assad sought to deflect blame for a deepening crisis in Syria’s already ravaged economy. A collapse in neighboring Lebanon’s banking system left thousands of Syrians unable to access their savings and sent the country’s currency into a tailspin.

Syrians also saw other reasons for Makhlouf’s reckoning. His family’s flaunting of its wealth — his sons have a habit of posing on Instagram with exotic cars — triggered outrage among impoverished Syrians.

There has also been speculation among Syrian expatriates that Assad's wife, Asma, who was born in London and worked as a banker with J.P. Morgan before their marriage in 2000, was asserting more control of the regime's finances to secure a fortune for the first family's three children.

The dismembering of Makhoul's empire began in 2019, when Asma was put in charge of the assets of Al-Bustan Association, a Makhoul-run charity that claimed to support families of regime loyalists killed in the war but became known as a conduit for funding for private militias. In 2017, the U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on Al-Bustan for "recruiting and mobilizing individuals to support and augment Syrian military forces." The organization was at the center of "a vast private network of militias and security-linked institutions," the [Treasury Department said](#).

Asma, who survived breast cancer in 2019, also heads the Syria Trust for Development, which serves as a major conduit for U.N. assistance money flowing into the country and as a key source of patronage for the Assad family, giving it a powerful say over who receives aid.

Several Syrian businessmen who fled the war said that Asma was behind the push to seize revenue from the cellphone industry in Syria and sideline Makhoul, in part to ensure that her own eldest son, Hafez, is in a strong position to someday succeed his father.

Last year, Makhoul suffered the biggest blow yet when he was stripped of his shares of Syriatel, one of the most profitable businesses in the country, with control of 55 percent of Syria's cellphone market.

A humiliated Makhoul resorted to [pleading for mercy](#) from his cousin in a series of jarring videos posted on Facebook. He said Syriatel regularly turned over half its revenue to the state and could not pay more without facing collapse. He expressed disbelief that security agencies he once wielded against business rivals were now raiding his own companies. He pleaded with Assad to end his financial "suffering" and blamed a "cadre" close to the president for "framing me as the one who is wrong."

In his most recent video, in July, Makhoul ranted against the new owners of Syriatel, accusing them of "thievery." He obliquely compared himself to Moses, suggesting that he would deliver Syria's poor from the predations of the "war profiteers" who had taken over his former company. Makhoul did not respond to a request for further comment.

Shell companies and stockpiled properties

The videos marked a staggering fall for Makhoul, while creating an unexpected opening in the position he had long held as Assad's money man.

Several ambitious Syrians auditioned for the job. Among them was Samer Foz, who had grown rich during the war by stockpiling properties including the former Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus, which has continued making money by catering to leaders of aid organizations and U.N. delegations that visit the country.

Foz, 48, had inherited a holding company from his father that billed itself in online brochures as an "international group operating in a wide range of industries," from pharmaceutical supplies to a Lebanese television station. Foz has homes in Dubai and Latakia, Syria, according to the U.S. government, and is a Syrian national who also holds citizenship in Turkey and the Caribbean nation Saint Kitts and Nevis.

Syrians with knowledge of Foz's operations said he amassed much of his wealth by exploiting his network of connections and ingratiating himself with Assad during the Syrian conflict.

Foz used a private jet to crisscross the Persian Gulf region, soliciting funds for Assad from donors, according to Syrians familiar with his activities. He also delivered ultimatums to wealthy Syrians who had fled the conflict that they could either sell to him the companies they had left behind or risk losing everything.

Secret financial records unearthed as part of the [Pandora Papers](#), which were obtained by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and shared with The Washington Post, show that Foz used the offshore financial system to set up shell companies outside Syria during the war to hold a yacht, a jet and other assets. In 2017, documents show, Foz changed the name of one of his offshore companies from “Foz Holdings” to “Skyy Capital Limited,” possibly to avoid attracting attention.

But his rising profile and involvement in a brazen real estate scheme put in him the crosshairs of the U.S. Treasury Department. He was the lead private investor in a real estate project called Marota City, which involved the planned construction of luxury high-rises in a Damascus suburb on expropriated land where the regime had bulldozed thousands of homes previously occupied by Syrians who fled the conflict.

The contract was valued at \$312 million, according to the Treasury Department, and appeared aimed at attracting money from Persian Gulf investors. But the project foundered after Syrian backers faced a flurry of U.S. sanctions. Among them was Foz, whom the Treasury Department accused of having “leveraged the atrocities of the Syrian conflict into a profit-generating enterprise.” Foz did not respond to a request for comment.

‘Moneyman duties’

Foz has since been eclipsed by another Assad-backed upstart.

Yasar Ibrahim, a 38-year-old businessman who was virtually unknown before the war, has presided over the shakedowns of major Syrian firms from an office in Assad’s presidential complex, according to Syrian executives and experts.

There are conflicting theories about what accounts for Ibrahim’s rising influence. An expert on Syria’s economy noted that Ibrahim’s father had served as a consultant to Hafez al-Assad, and that the Ibrahim family is from the same minority Alawite sect as the ruling family. “He is Alawite, and they are loyal to Bashar, not Asma,” who was raised Sunni, the expert said.

But others believe that Asma is Ibrahim’s main patron, in part because of her reported close ties with two of Ibrahim’s sisters. “He gained Assad’s trust by that connection,” said Joel Rayburn, who until last year served as special envoy for Syria at the State Department. “Little by little, he took on the moneyman duties.”

Either way, Ibrahim now sits at the center of a remarkable constellation of companies in oil, food, construction and other sectors. One, Hokoul SAL Offshore, was hit with U.S. sanctions in 2019 and described by the Treasury Department as a “front company” for the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

Most importantly, Ibrahim has amassed near-monopoly power over Syria’s cellphone market, having displaced the family owners of the support services company, pried control of Syriatel away from Assad’s cousin and seized the reins of MTN after the company’s capitulation in August.

The regime has portrayed these forays as a crackdown on corruption, a ploy that has won some public support, experts said. In that vein, Ibrahim has cast himself as a benefactor to targeted companies, even as he displaces their owners and commandeers their cash.

A Syrian executive said Ibrahim had summoned senior employees of the seized telecommunications support company to his office, trying to win their loyalties by saying he had intervened to rid the firm of corrupt bosses. He sought to convince the employees that he was “a good guy, a gentle guy, and a patriot,” the executive said. In reality, the executive said, “Yasar is the bully,” an enforcer for Assad.

Ibrahim did not respond to a request for comment made via the Syrian presidency, where he works as an economic and financial adviser.

Ibrahim and his sisters, Rana and Nasreen, were also put under U.S. sanctions last year for their allegedly predatory roles in the regime. The designations forced them to remove their names from the boards of

directors of Syriatel and other companies. But their standing with Assad appears undiminished. Earlier this fall, Foz was forced to hand over his stake in the former Four Seasons hotel to Ibrahim, according to Syrians with knowledge of the matter.

“The Ibrahims are by far the rising stars — it’s boggling how far their influence is spreading,” said Karam Shaar, a consultant on Syria and research director at the Operations and Policy Center in Turkey. Even so, Shaar said Ibrahim’s standing is as precarious as that of any of his predecessors. The Assads “use people like him as pawns, as fronts for the regime,” Shaar said. “If you get too strong, you will be chopped and replaced by someone else.”

Most in Syria face deprivation

Syria today faces a “humanitarian catastrophe [that] is now among the largest in the world,” according to a senior U.S. official. The vast majority of the population lives on less than \$1.90 a day and 6.2 million are listed as “internally displaced” by the United Nations, meaning they remain in Syria but were forced from their homes by a conflict in which Assad used poison gas and barrel bombs against his own people.

In recent months, there have been growing signs that other Middle East leaders who once worked toward Assad’s ouster are resigned to his survival. But U.S. officials and Syria experts said the prospects for postwar recovery in Syria remain distant. The Biden administration has cautioned countries across the Middle East not to aid Assad financially or otherwise. And while Russia and Iran helped rescue Assad militarily when he seemed most at risk of losing the war, neither country has signaled any willingness to cover the projected cost of Syria’s rebuilding.

Meanwhile, life for ordinary Syrians continues to deteriorate. Soaring prices put all but the most basic foods beyond the reach of ordinary people. In Damascus, lines for fuel stretch for blocks on end from the early morning hours till late at night, residents say. Blackouts are common.

“We have deadly poverty, high prices, people cannot pay their rent,” said Salwa, a Damascus resident who asked that her full name not be used. “Everyone wants to leave, she said. “People would give anything to leave the country.”

The shakedowns have padded regime accounts, with the Finance Ministry claiming that government revenue had tripled during the first nine months of this year. But Assad may be undermining the country’s longer-term prospects, said Shaar, the consultant. “He thinks you can coerce businessmen to do what he wants, but that’s not how economies work,” he said. “They will run away.”

The country has indeed seen an exodus of business owners — possibly thousands of them, according to Syrian [media reports](#). Many are taking what remains of their capital and expertise to Egypt and other Arab countries.

Assad, however, remains ensconced in an upscale neighborhood of Damascus, a city largely unscathed by the conflict. Elites who have profited from the war continue to dine out and drink in bars and restaurants.

Even the Makhloufs appear to be clinging to aspects of their privileged lifestyle. Rami Makhoul continues to live at his villa in a suburb of the city. His son, Ali, [surfaced on social media in October](#) in Beverly Hills behind the wheel of a \$300,000 Ferrari.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Clues: omicron spread at Norway party
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-cases-at-norway-christmas-party-provide-clues-on-new-variants-spread-11638554033?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos4
GIST	An Omicron outbreak at a Norwegian Christmas party is providing an early, if still anecdotal, data point on the ease through which the new variant spreads between vaccinated people, and how mild its symptoms at times can be.

Before [Scatec](#) AS A, a Norway-based renewable-energy company, hosted the annual holiday party, it took all the major safety precautions, said Stian Tvede Karlsen, a company spokesman. Only vaccinated employees were invited. All had to take a rapid test the day before. The party, at Louise, an upscale Oslo restaurant serving seafood and Scandinavian fare, included about 120 people, several of whom had [just returned from South Africa](#), where the company has a solar-panel project.

More than half of those present have since tested positive for Covid-19, with at least 13 confirmed to have the new variant in what appears to be the world's biggest Omicron outbreak outside southern Africa—and a glimpse into how it fares in a highly-vaccinated population.

The Oslo municipal health department said it expects more Omicron cases to be confirmed among the 64 Covid-19 cases as medical workers test the remaining patients.

The cluster is remarkable because it took place in a bubble of immunized people, in a country where more than 80% of adults are fully vaccinated. Norway has opened up booster shots for all adults as winter sets in, a time when people begin mixing more indoors, thus providing the virus more opportunities to spread.

But it also provides signs of hope, however anecdotal and thin, that Omicron cases can turn out to be mild among healthy, vaccinated adults. So far, none of the infected employees are seriously ill, said Mr. Karlsen.

“People have different kinds of symptoms but none are severe,” he said. “No one has any serious issues.”

Still, the rapid spread, he added, had taken him aback: “That’s what’s really curious...All of a sudden, 60 people. It’s just insane.”

None of the 64 Covid-19 cases have needed hospital care, said Tine Ravlo, assistant district superintendent for the Oslo municipal government. All of them are under isolation at home, she said.

“For now, what they describe are the mild symptoms...headache, cough, sore throat and flulike symptoms,” she said. “Several have had symptoms and now say they feel better.”

Widespread vaccination has likely eased the initial burden on Norway’s hospitals as the pandemic begins its second winter there. The country is seeing more than 2,000 new cases daily, although authorities are still rolling out new lockdown-like measures to spare intensive-care wards from being overwhelmed. On Dec. 1, data compiled by Our World in Data recorded 38 confirmed deaths that day, out of a total population of 5.4 million.

From Friday morning, mask mandates that had been lifted are back in place, private indoor gatherings are limited to fewer than 100 people, office workers are encouraged to work from home, and bars are operating at reduced capacity.

The capital, Oslo, has canceled a major Christmas gathering and other holiday events are being called off as well. The country is averaging six deaths daily.

Lab results from experiments into how easily the new variant evades vaccines are still a week or two away, leaving scientists to scrutinize outbreaks like Oslo’s for early clues.

By itself, the high level of transmission at Scatec’s Christmas party might not say much about how contagious the new Omicron variant is. An hourslong party with lots of guests talking to each other in a closed, indoor and insulated environment would make for an ideal superspreader event, even for earlier variants of the coronavirus, said Alexandra Phelan, an assistant professor of global and public-health law and ethics at Georgetown University.

	<p>The mild symptoms might not tell us much, for the moment, she added. But the cases added to evidence that vaccines aren't preventing infections, though they might still prevent the risk of severe disease in most people.</p> <p>"If they were of working age and young enough to be partying into the night, they were already probably at a low risk," she said. "The big question that this is starting to add data to, at least anecdotal data, is immune evasion."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 China tariffs fuel US trade boom w/Taiwan
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-taiwan-trade-11638663970?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>U.S. trade with Taiwan is booming, as the self-governing island cashes in on surging demand for its computer chips and lures factories back from China, where many exports to the U.S. including electronics are subject to 25% tariffs.</p> <p>Taiwan is now ranked No. 8 globally in trade with the U.S., just behind the U.K. and ahead of Vietnam. It exported a record \$72 billion in goods to the U.S. in the 12 months through September. That is up about 70% since 2017, the year before the Trump administration imposed the Chinese tariffs.</p> <p>U.S. exports to Taiwan have climbed about 35% from pre-tariff levels to \$35 billion annually, also a record, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. The increase has largely been driven by purchases of American crude oil, machinery and cars.</p> <p>Expanded commerce between Taiwan and the U.S. comes as they move to strengthen their trading ties formally over the objections of Beijing, which considers Taiwan a part of its territory.</p> <p>Taiwan is a major supplier of semiconductors for the U.S., and its sharp increase in exports reflects more demand for chips across many industries.</p> <p>Still, the biggest trigger for the rising trade between Taiwan and the U.S. has been the tariffs on Chinese goods, which the Biden administration has kept in force.</p> <p>Scores of Taiwan-based companies have shifted at least some production back from mainland China to avoid a price increase for their U.S. customers. Taiwan's government encouraged the trend by offering the returning companies help securing land, financing construction and finding employees.</p> <p>Since 2019, 243 such returning companies have been approved for relocation assistance on investments totaling more than \$30 billion, according to the agency overseeing the program, InvesTaiwan.</p> <p>"They knew that manufacturing was going to need to get around those tariffs somewhere," said Andrew Wylegala, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Taiwan. "This was a great opportunity after seeing so much outbound flow from Taiwan to China to try to recapture a part of it."</p> <p>Taipei-based JC Grand Corp., which makes construction fasteners and metal hardware sold in the U.S. at Home Depot, Lowe's and other stores, is among the manufacturers shifting production to Taiwan from China.</p> <p>For 20 years, about half of JC Grand's products were made in China's Zhejiang province. As it looked to expand operations, Taiwan offered incentives that lowered the cost of buying factory equipment, said Jon Hodowany, general manager.</p> <p>Ultimately, however, it was the tariffs on products made in China that proved the decisive factor, Mr. Hodowany said.</p>

“Our idea was to do the initial investment in China,” Mr. Hodowany said. “The tariffs just sort of put the nail in the coffin.” Most of JC Grand’s exports to the U.S. now come from Taiwan, he said.

Other factors have driven increased exports from Taiwan including the huge demand for personal computers, electronic equipment and the semiconductors that power them as the Covid-19 pandemic forced many workers to set up operations at home.

“In 2020 and 2021, we went through total immersion on tech usage,” said Revital Shpangental, chief executive of the Taipei-based consulting firm Anemone Ventures, which advises tech businesses on Asia strategies. “Everybody relied much more on tech and that by itself was a major increase to the demand.”

Among companies relocating operations from China to Taiwan, more than 70% are in the electronics industry, according to an estimate from InvesTaiwan Chief Executive Emile Chang.

While the incentive program ends this year, Mr. Chang said he is considering extending the program up to three more years as rising cross-strait tensions have put strains on some Taiwanese businesses operating in China.

Taiwan’s government has also sought to deepen its economic ties with the U.S. as a bulwark against potential Chinese aggression.

Taiwan’s democratically elected President Tsai Ing-wen has actively sought a free-trade deal with the U.S. Earlier this year the Biden administration revived direct negotiations with Taipei, holding the first formal talks in five years.

Beijing has objected to the talks. Liu Pengyu, a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, said the U.S. should abide by the One-China principle under which the U.S. recognizes that there is only one Chinese government.

“We firmly oppose any form of official and military contacts between the U.S. and Taiwan, and oppose the U.S. interference in China’s internal affairs,” he said.

Joanne Ou, a spokeswoman for Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said the increase in U.S.-Taiwan trade highlights common interests between the two sides.

Much of the rise in U.S. exports to Taiwan has come from stepped-up purchases of crude oil as the U.S. became a net exporter and as Taiwan refiners sought to diversify away from primarily relying on supplies from the Middle East.

For the U.S., semiconductor sales make up the biggest category of imports from Taiwan and have been climbing rapidly. Chips are in such high demand for use in products including automobiles, appliances and videogames that there have been global shortages across industries. The U.S., along with much of the world, is dependent on Taiwan to boost their supplies.

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. , one of the world’s largest and most advanced chip makers, has been at the center of surging demand for microchips. Earlier this year, the company said it would spend \$100 billion over the next three years on research and development and expanding production.

Taiwan’s dominance in this field has raised concern that the U.S. might become too reliant on its chips, especially as Beijing ratchets up calls for reunification and boosts its military presence near Taiwan.

To mitigate those concerns, officials in Washington have sought to bring some overseas chip manufacturing to the U.S., where Intel Corp. , TSMC and Samsung Electronics Co. are building multibillion-dollar factories.

	<p>That process will take years, however. Ryan Hass, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said Taiwan's role in chip production points to even closer ties with the U.S. ahead.</p> <p>"Taiwan matters in its own right," Mr. Hass said. "The Biden administration needs to deepen the relationship in substantive ways."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Search for clues to omicron spread in US
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/clues-to-omicron-variants-u-s-spread-include-test-samples-sewage-11638700202?mod=hp_lead_pos1
GIST	<p>Covid-19 test samples and wastewater are helping researchers across the U.S. figure out how widespread the Omicron variant might be.</p> <p>Surveillance is more robust in the U.S. than when the Alpha or Delta variants of the Covid-19 virus emerged, public-health officials and experts say. A fault in some commonly used Covid-19 tests also helps scientists flag potential Omicron cases.</p> <p>But gaps remain, particularly from one part of the country to another. Nearly 30% of known Covid-19 cases were sequenced and shared online in Vermont during the past three months, according to an international database of genetic sequences called GISAID, compared with some 1% in Oklahoma.</p> <p>"We've greatly increased the number that we have been sequencing, but they're not equally distributed," said Julie Swann, department head of Industrial and Systems Engineering at North Carolina State University. "It's quite likely that there are additional cases that we have not found."</p> <p>Public-health, commercial and academic laboratories in the U.S. analyze genomic samples from positive PCR tests and report results to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some laboratories send the agency test samples directly.</p> <p>Early this year, the U.S. was publishing some 3,000 virus genome sequences a week, according to CDC data. For the week ended Nov. 20, the U.S. published more than 80,000 sequences, a jump that health authorities and experts credit to increased funding and coordination among states, researchers and federal officials. Between 5% and 10% of positive Covid-19 samples are sequenced in the U.S., according to Kelly Wroblewski, director of infectious diseases at the Association of Public Health Laboratories.</p> <p>"Our surveillance system is well-placed to find it," Ms. Wroblewski said of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>A testing glitch caused by the variant is helping track Omicron, too. Many makers of both PCR and rapid-antigen tests have said their tests can detect Omicron, and the Food and Drug Administration said on Nov. 30 that it appears likely that most widely used tests in the U.S. should detect the variant.</p> <p>Some tests are affected by the variant in a way that researchers are using to their advantage.</p> <p>Molecular PCR tests work by identifying parts of the virus's genome, and many such tests look for multiple snippets of its genetic code. With Omicron, a mutation on the variant's spike protein causes a failure in one section on some PCR tests that looks for the spike gene, including a commonly used test from Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc.</p> <p>The other sections on the test still work and flag the sample as positive. That flawed marker in a positive test result can signal to researchers that the Omicron variant might be responsible. Researchers often still need to get the sample sequenced for confirmation because the anomaly occurs with other variants as well. A spate of such tests is what signaled to researchers in South Africa that something unusual was happening.</p>

“This ‘S-gene’ dropout is a helpful screening tool,” said Angela Harris, an assistant professor at North Carolina State University whose lab sequences clinical samples and wastewater.

Dozens of public-health laboratories in the U.S. plan to use more Thermo Fisher tests during the next two weeks and give priority to any S-gene dropout samples for sequencing, APhL’s Ms. Wroblewski said. Doing genetic sequencing of many samples can take up to a week, she added, but researchers can do more-targeted runs with the subset of samples that exhibit the S-gene dropout in less time.

Scientists at Cornell University in New York on Monday started doing a second layer of PCR-testing, running positive samples from another test through a Thermo Fisher test to see whether they had the S-gene dropout, said Diego Diel, director of the Cornell Covid-19 Testing Laboratory. The lab, which sequences about 80% of positive Covid-19 samples in Tompkins County, hadn’t identified an Omicron case as of Friday.

“It’s really important to identify variants as early as possible after they emerge,” Dr. Diel said.

Researchers at the University of Washington have reviewed samples from nearly 1,500 positive PCR tests administered during the past two weeks to check for the S-gene dropout that might indicate the Omicron variant’s presence, said Pavitra Roychoudhury, an acting instructor at the university’s department of laboratory medicine and pathology. As of Friday, the one sample that exhibited the S-gene failure turned out not to be the Omicron variant after genetic sequencing.

Some researchers are also searching for Omicron in sewers. More communities during the past year have begun monitoring wastewater for traces of the Covid-19 virus, signs that they use to spot and monitor local spread. Those systems can also help researchers spot variants as they emerge locally, said Samuel Scarpino, managing director of pathogen surveillance at the Rockefeller Foundation.

“The more we know about where Omicron is and where it’s spreading, the more we’ll be able to say about what the public can do to keep themselves safe,” Dr. Scarpino said.

Essentially all U.S. samples sequenced in the week ending Nov. 27 were caused by the Delta variant, according to CDC data. The seven-day average of newly reported Covid-19 cases in the U.S. was about 86,400 as of Friday, federal officials said.

Officials and researchers have taken steps including greater scrutiny of epidemiological and diagnostic data and expanded testing of international travelers to track Omicron.

“We don’t really know what is going to happen, how well it is going to compete or not compete with Delta,” Anthony Fauci, the Biden administration’s top medical adviser, said during a briefing. Health officials will start answering that question by tracking the proportion of samples that turn out to be Omicron compared with Delta in the coming weeks, he said.

U.S. laboratories often process more than one million Covid-19 tests a day, but testing rates vary across the country. Health officials also can’t collect samples from over-the-counter, at-home Covid-19 tests unless the individual gets a second, confirmatory PCR test.

“There are parts of the country doing a really remarkable amount of sequencing and there are other areas that are not, and those tend to be the same areas that just aren’t doing as much testing,” said Scott Becker, chief executive officer of APhL.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 US: Iran walks back prior nuke concessions
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/04/iran-concessions-nuclear-talks-us-official

<p>GIST</p>	<p>Iran walked back all compromises made in previous talks on reviving the 2015 nuclear deal, pocketed compromises made by others and asked for more in its latest proposals, a senior US state department official told reporters on Saturday.</p> <p>Iran continues to accelerate its nuclear program in pretty provocative ways and China and Russia were taken aback at how far Iran had walked back its proposals in talks in Vienna, the official told reporters, speaking on condition of anonymity.</p> <p>Donald Trump withdrew the US from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in May 2018.</p> <p>Indirect talks between Iran and the Biden administration on saving the deal broke off on Friday, as European officials voiced dismay on at sweeping demands by Iran's new, hardline government.</p> <p>The seventh round of talks in Vienna is the first with delegates sent by Iran's anti-western president, Ebrahim Raisi, on how to resuscitate the agreement under which Iran limited its nuclear program in return for relief from economic sanctions.</p> <p>Iran came "with proposals that walked back anything – any of the compromises Iran had floated here in the six rounds of talks, pocket all of the compromises that others, and the US in particular, had made, and then asked for more", the senior US official said.</p> <p>The official told reporters he did not know when the next round of talks would resume – other officials had said they would reconvene next week – and stressed the date was less important than Iran's willingness to negotiate seriously.</p> <p>On Saturday, Iranian air defences fired a missile as part of an exercise over the central town of Natanz, which houses nuclear installations, state TV reported after local residents reported hearing a large blast.</p> <p>State TV said air defence units fired the missile to test a rapid reaction force over Natanz.</p> <p>"Such exercises are carried out in a completely secure environment ... and there is no cause for concern," an army spokesman, Shahin Taqikhani, said.</p> <p>Iranian news agencies earlier reported a large explosion in the sky above Natanz, but said there was no official explanation of the incident. The semi-official Fars news agency quoted its reporter in nearby Badroud as saying a short blast was heard which was accompanied by an intense light in the sky.</p> <p>The Islamic Republic says its nuclear ambitions are peaceful.</p> <p>Israel opposed the original 2015 Iran nuclear accord with world powers, which aimed to curb Iran's nuclear programme in return for lifting sanctions against Tehran, as too limited in scope and duration.</p> <p>Israeli leaders have long threatened military action against Iran if they deem diplomacy a dead end for denying it nuclear weaponry.</p>
<p>Return to Top</p>	

<p>HEADLINE</p>	<p>12/04 December weather extremes across country</p>
<p>SOURCE</p>	<p>https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/04/extreme-weather-us-record-temperatures-la-nina</p>
<p>GIST</p>	<p>A blizzard warning for normally balmy Hawaii and an absence of snow in mountainous Colorado were among a series of bizarre weather forecasts and events in the US as December began.</p> <p>Meteorologists attributed the latest batch of record-shattering weather extremes to a stuck jet stream and the effects of a La Niña weather pattern from cooling Pacific waters.</p>

For US meteorologists, winter starts on 1 December. But on Thursday 2 December, 65 weather stations across the US set record high temperatures, including Springfield, Missouri, hitting 75F (24C) and Roanoke, Virginia, 72F (22C). Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Billings, Montana, broke longstanding heat records by 6F.

Parts of Canada and Montana have seen December records too. On Friday, parts of South Carolina and Georgia hit record highs.

In Washington state, Seattle, Bellingham and Quillayute set 90-day fall records for rainfall. Bellingham was doused by nearly 2ft of rain. The Olympic and Cascade mountains have been hit harder, with more than 50in in three months, according to the National Weather Service (NWS). Forks, Washington, received more rain in 90 days than Las Vegas gets in 13 years.

There was a blizzard warning on Hawaii's Big Island summits with up to 12in of snow expected and wind gusts of more than 100mph. But snow has gone missing in Colorado.

Before this year, the latest first measurable snowfall in Denver was 21 November, back in 1934. There is a slight possibility of snow on Monday night, according to the NWS. Yet with no snow since 22 April this is the city's third-longest stretch without it.

The jet stream, the river of air that moves weather from west to east, has been stuck. That means low pressure on one part of the stream is bringing rain to the Pacific north-west while high pressure over about two-thirds of the US produces dry and warmer weather, said Brian Hurley, a senior meteorologist at the NWS Weather Prediction Center in College Park, Maryland.

If the jet stream moves more or bends differently, rain and other extreme weather won't be as concentrated, Hurley said. This is a typical weather pattern with a natural La Niña weather oscillation, he added.

The flip side of El Niño, a La Niña is a cooling of parts of the central Pacific that changes weather patterns across the globe. La Niñas tend to bring more rain to the Pacific north-west and make the south drier and warmer.

These bouts of extreme weather happen more frequently as the world warms, said meteorologist Jeff Masters, founder of Weather Underground who now works at Yale Climate Connections. But scientists have not done the required study to attribute these events to human-caused climate change.

In Boulder, Colorado, meteorologist Bob Henson enjoyed a rare December bike ride on Thursday. Still, "there's a lot of angst about the lack of snow", he said. "It puts you in a psychic quandary. You enjoy the warm weather while keeping in mind it's not good for Earth to be warming."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Omicron make Covid more transmissible?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/03/what-does-the-future-hold-for-coronavirus-explainer
GIST	<p>When scientists predicted, months ago, that Covid-19 could be entering an endemic phase, many felt ready for the crisis period of the pandemic to be over. The tantalising suggestion that coronavirus might, at some foreseeable point, be just another seasonal cold felt welcome. But the emergence of the Omicron variant, just weeks before Christmas, shows this is not guaranteed to be a smooth or quick transition.</p> <p>Will the virus become milder?</p> <p>A recurring suggestion is that pathogens evolve, over some undefined period, to be more transmissible and less virulent, bringing virus and host towards a state of benign coexistence. If Omicron is spreading so quickly, some wondered, perhaps it will at least be milder. But experts say this expectation has no scientific basis. "Put simply, this has been one of the most baffling misinformation myths peddled during the pandemic," said Prof Alan McNally, director of the Institute of Microbiology and Infection at the University</p>

of Birmingham. “There is almost no evidence of any human pathogenic virus evolving towards reduced virulence.”

The simplistic argument behind the idea is that if a pathogen kills its host, or makes them too sick to leave the house, then it gives itself a worse chance of propagating. So by the logic of survival of the fittest, there would be a selective pressure for milder strains. Sadly, the dynamic is more complex in the real world.

“It’s really unpredictable what will happen to the evolution of the host or the virus,” said Brian Ferguson, an immunologist at the University of Cambridge. “You can pick out examples of things going one way or the other depending on what point you want to make.”

In the case of coronavirus, there is also an obvious hole in the argument: transmission normally occurs before symptoms start or during the earliest stage of symptoms, meaning that severity of illness has little influence on the spread of the virus.

The impact of Covid may become less each year as immunity builds up through infection, vaccination and – possibly – annual boosters.

Will it keep getting more transmissible?

Yes, probably. “Strains that transmit more easily and that evade existing immunity will have an advantage over those strains which are less transmissible and more susceptible to immunity,” said Prof Kit Yates, a senior lecturer in mathematics at the University of Bath. We have already seen this occurring with the shift from the original variant, which had a basic R number of about 3, followed by Alpha, estimated to have an R0 of 4-5 and Delta, with an R0 of 6-8.

“There’s no reason to believe this won’t go any higher,” said Yates. “Measles, which is one of the most infectious human-to-human diseases, has an R0 which has been estimated to be as high as 18. There’s certainly still room for the R0 of Covid to increase.”

Scientists say predicting where the ceiling might be is extremely difficult. “It’s probably not very sensible to try and second-guess that,” said McNally. “Numerous human pathogenic viruses have been co-evolving with us for hundreds of thousands of years. So I don’t think there could ever be a confident prediction of a ceiling being reached.”

On the plus side, R0 is a less pressing concern in a vaccinated population, where there is more protection from serious disease.

Will it keep escaping our vaccines?

To some extent, although scientists are not expecting new strains to completely evade immunity and put us back to square one. “The broad scientific consensus is that this is not what will happen with Omicron,” said Yates. “It is believed that existing immunity will still provide some defence against the new variant, especially against severe disease.”

There is also a limit to how much the virus’s spike protein can evolve, because the spike is the key that allows it to infect our cells.

Nevertheless, there is still a scenario where protection is weakened enough to require an update to existing vaccines – and companies are already playing out whether Omicron meets these criteria. This poses vaccine makers with a dilemma. One option is to make a new variant vaccine that is closely matched to Omicron, for example. This creates a vulnerability, however, because new variants could emerge from Delta or earlier strains, for which the updated vaccine would be an even worse match. And if different strains are dominant in different regions, the question of which vaccines to deploy where becomes complicated.

	<p>“We’re questioning whether chasing the globe to hunt down the next variant to tweak the vaccine again and again is necessarily the best way of going,” said Prof Danny Altmann, an immunologist at Imperial College London.</p> <p>He and others are investigating vaccine strategies that would give broader protection, which they hope will be less sensitive to future mutations of the spike protein. “We’d love to slow down and do the homework properly and find out which version of this is going to give you a future-proofed answer,” he said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Displaced still wait Hurricane Ida FEMA aid
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/us/hurricane-ida-fema-housing.html
GIST	<p>HOUMA, La. — In Tammy Manuel’s neighborhood, hulking piles of debris fester at the edges of lawns cleared to make way for thousands of mobile homes intended for families who saw their homes destroyed by Hurricane Ida in late August.</p> <p>But three months after the storm tore the roof off her pale yellow house down the bayou from Houma in southeast Louisiana, sending the ceilings crashing in and soaking her belongings, the yards of Ms. Manuel and many of her neighbors are still bare.</p> <p>Like thousands of others in the rural communities hardest hit by the storm, Ms. Manuel said she requested assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency right away. But FEMA said that the first trailers — boxy structures also known as manufactured housing units — wouldn’t arrive until mid-November.</p> <p>Instead, the agency offered Ms. Manuel a voucher to reimburse her for a hotel or her rent elsewhere. But many of the area’s already limited available houses and hotels were destroyed or full of recovery workers. That left Ms. Manuel and her two siblings, whose mobile homes were also left uninhabitable, seeking shelter at the closest hotel they could find, a two-hour drive west in Abbeville, La.</p> <p>Ms. Manuel is still there, making the commute back home multiple times a week to salvage what she can. She and many of her neighbors who were devastated at losing everything are now frustrated at the lack of safe housing options near their homes and jobs.</p> <p>As climate change contributes to more punishing natural disasters across the country, federal agencies have repeatedly failed to provide temporary housing swiftly in their wake, exposing wide gaps in disaster policy. In fact, since Hurricane Ida, a makeshift effort by the state of Louisiana has been more successful in providing short-term shelter to storm victims than FEMA has been.</p> <p>“This process of bringing in units is complicated, it’s complex, it takes time,” said Keith Turi, assistant administrator of recovery at FEMA. The agency has secured enough units to house everyone who needs one after Hurricane Ida, he said, but the challenge is how and where to put them.</p> <p>“They’re each like miniature construction projects,” Mr. Turi said, noting that topography, debris and utility hookups can present obstacles at each site. It’s expensive, too: Each unit can cost about \$200,000 altogether, according to disaster housing experts.</p> <p>It wasn’t until November of 2021 that every resident was placed in temporary housing after Hurricane Laura hit southwest Louisiana in August of 2020, though many residents were put in units before then. After Hurricane Harvey hit the Houston area in August of 2017, it wasn’t until the following June that every resident was placed in a unit.</p> <p>At issue is not just competence but difficult policy choices still being debated. Is supplying housing for disaster victims the appropriate role for government? If so, which level of government? And how long after a disaster do victims need housing assistance?</p>

“It can be done if there’s a will,” said Laurie Schoeman, a disaster recovery specialist for Enterprise Community Partners, a nonprofit. But FEMA has steered away from direct housing toward rental and hotel vouchers.

“FEMA doesn’t want to be in the business of housing,” Ms. Schoeman said.

Caught in the middle are people like Ms. Manuel and her neighbors, some of whom have resorted to sleeping in cars or tents or inside moldy, damaged homes. Some have doubled or tripled up with family and friends.

“It seems like they would already have steps, like: This is what we do when something happens,” said Ms. Manuel. “It’s like they’re trying to figure out what to do next instead of already knowing.”

More than three months after Hurricane Ida tore through coastal Louisiana, likely thousands of residents of the hardest hit bayou communities southwest of New Orleans remain displaced. Just 126 households out of the 4,465 found eligible by FEMA for direct housing had moved into units, according to a FEMA spokeswoman. There is no estimated timeline for completion.

After months of waiting for FEMA housing, Ms. Manuel’s older brother and sister finally received help from a different source: The state provided them each with a trailer, part of a new program to meet the acute housing need. The program has rolled out much more quickly than FEMA’s: By the beginning of December about 1,200 families had moved into Louisiana’s trailers — campers that can be towed by a vehicle — with another 800 expected to move in over the coming weeks. But the program, started from scratch, faced delays, too.

On Nov. 10, more than two months after the storm, just 368 families had moved into trailers. And while the more compact trailers may be easier to set up, they are less sturdy over the long term. Plus, they can be used for only six months under the state’s current agreement with FEMA.

Given the logistical challenges of setting up direct housing, FEMA views trailers as a last resort, Mr. Turi said.

In the aftermath of several major hurricanes in 2017 and 2018, FEMA provided rental assistance to 745,660 households, according to a report from the Government Accountability Office. It provided direct housing — through trailers, mostly — to just 5,368.

But in the wake of far-ranging disasters like Hurricane Ida that cut a wide swath in the available housing, housing experts say these assistance funds are a weak substitute for direct housing, especially in rural areas with few hotels.

FEMA’s shift away from direct housing began after Hurricane Katrina, when trailers used to house the displaced were found to have high levels of formaldehyde. Since then, when direct housing has been necessary, the agency has tended toward larger, sturdier manufactured housing units and abided by strict rules and regulations, and an often lengthy process for determining eligibility.

But the delays in providing temporary housing have subjected disaster victims to other dangers.

Christine Ledet spent nearly three months using a generator for electricity after the storm’s winds lifted her mobile home off its pilings and moved it eight feet away. She received \$13,000 from FEMA for repairs, she said — enough to put it back in place. But the money is not enough to repair the windows that were blown in, the electric box that was damaged or the mold spreading on her walls, she said. Her appeal is pending.

“The people that really need the trailers and the campers are the ones that don’t have nothing,” said Ms. Ledet, who’s been sharing her damaged home with her granddaughter and daughter-in-law. “And they’re being overlooked.”

With every passing week that residents wait for temporary housing, the prospect of rebuilding falls further out of reach.

Over a year after Hurricane Laura, Lake Charles, La., still looks like a ghost town, said Brandi Weldon, a lifelong resident.

In the 10 months before Ms. Weldon's FEMA trailer arrived after Hurricane Laura tore the roof off her home in Lake Charles, La., she and her sons bounced among the couches of family and friends and hotel beds. Moving around so much was not just difficult but dangerous for Ms. Weldon, who is diabetic. She struggled to set up her home dialysis equipment every night and often had to rely on fast food, which led her blood pressure to spike.

"A lot of people were in a predicament to where they had no choice but to move away," Ms. Weldon said.

"Our federal programs are federal programs at the end of the day," said Lauren Lefebvre, public affairs director for a FEMA regional office that includes Louisiana. "They can oftentimes involve a process, there's paperwork, there's multiple things you have to do to be able to take advantage of it. And that might not always be the best thing for a survivor."

That bureaucracy, she said, hampers the agency's ability to quickly deploy housing and makes it hard for the agency to adapt its disaster response to particular circumstances.

To get around some of this red tape, FEMA has recommended that states design and implement their own temporary housing programs when they are necessary, to be reimbursed by FEMA.

But state and local governments have had difficulty standing up temporary housing programs that would comply with FEMA's often complex reimbursement policies.

Even Louisiana, among the states most frequently hit by climate disasters, had no temporary housing plans before Hurricane Ida hit.

"Housing is not anywhere in our scope — that's always been a federal mission here," said Mike Steele, communications director with the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

Emergency management experts say that some responsibility for temporary housing necessarily falls on the shoulders of local governments, who know their communities and can more easily identify vulnerable residents and group sites for trailers.

But for many local governments, especially smaller ones on limited budgets, this sort of planning isn't a priority and often conflicts with FEMA's approach.

Junia Howell, a sociologist at the University of Pittsburgh, said that when FEMA relies on a reimbursement model but doesn't provide state and local governments — especially those with fewer resources — the tools they need to implement their own programs, the system breaks down. "And it breaks down over and over and over again," she said.

By the time many disaster survivors make it into FEMA housing, they are confronted with a new problem: where to go next.

Ms. Weldon, who moved into her FEMA trailer in June, has less than three months until the FEMA program expires, 18 months after a federal disaster was declared for Hurricane Laura.

In some cases, FEMA trailers can be purchased by recipients for longer-term use. But often, the trailers aren't compliant with floodplain or wildfire hazard restrictions, leaving FEMA to auction them off for cheap after the disaster period.

	<p>With much of the housing stock of Lake Charles still awaiting repairs, and the few available apartments going for hundreds of dollars a month more than they were before the storm, Ms. Weldon is out of options. The long-term struggles after Hurricane Laura are a foreboding message to residents and advocates reeling from Hurricane Ida.</p> <p>“We’re going to end up in the same situation we’re in now but worse, because they won’t have the trailers to live in,” said Genie Trahan-Ardoin, who has been providing assistance door to door with the Helio Foundation, a local nonprofit.</p> <p>“Everybody you talk to, you ask them, ‘What are you going to do?’” she said. “They say, ‘I don’t know.’ ”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 Europe: Iran nuclear talks head for collapse
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-negotiations-europeans.html
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS — Western negotiators trying to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal said on Friday that the new, more hard-line government in Iran is proposing unacceptable changes to the existing draft agreement, even as it is proceeding apace with its nuclear program.</p> <p>Unless Tehran shifts its stance quickly, the diplomats from Britain, France and Germany warned after five days of meetings in Vienna, there is little possibility of a successful negotiation. The talks were suspended for consultations with governments and may resume next week.</p> <p>“Over five months ago, Iran interrupted negotiations, and since then, Iran has fast-forwarded its nuclear program,” the three said in a joint statement. “This week, it has backtracked on diplomatic progress made. Iran is breaking with almost all of the difficult compromises crafted in months of tough negotiations and is demanding substantial changes to the text” that undermine the draft, which was between 70 and 80 percent finished, they said.</p> <p>Iran says it wants to return to the 2015 deal, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or J.C.P.O.A. But the Europeans said that some of Iran’s proposals are not only inconsistent with that deal but “go beyond” its provisions.</p> <p>“It is unclear,” they added, “how these new gaps can be closed in a realistic time frame on the basis of the Iranian drafts.” While European governments “remain fully committed to a diplomatic way forward,” they said, “time is running out.”</p> <p>It was the first set of negotiations after a five-month hiatus while a new Iranian government took office and considered its stance toward the nuclear deal, which former President Donald J. Trump abandoned in May 2018. Mr. Trump then piled on punishing economic sanctions in an effort to bring Iran back to the negotiating table in a weaker position or even to collapse the government itself.</p> <p>The pressure campaign failed. The Biden administration wants to revive the deal and extend its duration to 25 years from 15. But the Iranian government not only wants all sanctions lifted, it also wants to preserve some of the major investment it has made since then in building advanced centrifuges and enriching uranium far beyond what the agreement permitted.</p> <p>Enrichment means raising the proportion of fuel that is uranium-235, the most potent form of the element, which in nature is less than 1 percent of all uranium. For nuclear power plants, it is usually enriched to less than 5 percent uranium-235; for an atomic bomb, more than 90 percent is needed.</p> <p>Iran has started enriching uranium to 60 percent, a level that has no civilian use, experts have said. It leaves Tehran only a month or so from being able to create bomb-grade nuclear fuel.</p>

Iran denies it intends to build a nuclear weapon, but it is also denying the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations nuclear watchdog, access to important nuclear facilities that it had under the 2015 pact. With the limited monitoring facilities still at its disposal, the agency has determined that Iran has installed advanced centrifuges in its deeply buried Fordow complex and is enriching uranium there, banned under the 2015 deal.

Initially, after Mr. Trump pulled the U.S. out of the deal, Iran adhered to its restrictions, hoping the other signatories would find a workaround. But after a year, Tehran lost patience and started breaching the limits of the agreement. It now has more than 2,300 kilograms of enriched uranium, 11 times what the deal allowed. Iran is also now turning gaseous uranium into metal, an important step in making a bomb.

Unless Iran has a sudden change of position, the United States and Israel will soon be faced with more serious questions about what to do to rein in Iran and keep their vow that Tehran will never be allowed to have a nuclear weapon. Europe, too, will feel compelled to contemplate new and much harsher sanctions.

But despite American and Israeli efforts at sabotage and even more economic sanctions, Iran is getting closer to having the knowledge needed to become a nuclear threshold state — an intentionally ambiguous position of not having a nuclear weapon but being able to construct one in a relatively short time, as little as a year.

The Iranian negotiators have said they want to reach a deal in Vienna, but that the United States, having withdrawn, must move first. They are demanding the removal of all economic sanctions, not just those on its nuclear program but others penalizing it for its role in regional conflicts, including attacks on its neighbors. Only then, they say, will Iran cut back its nuclear program.

The Western position has been “compliance for compliance,” with carefully negotiated sequencing. Iran says it also wants guarantees that Washington will never abandon the deal again, a politically and legally impossible promise.

Iran’s chief negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani, told Iranian news outlets that “it’s true that European parties were not very satisfied with some of our proposals, but these proposals were based on common principles between the two sides.”

This week, European negotiators said, would signal whether Iran was serious about returning to the 2015 deal. In essence, that would mean Tehran’s accepting the draft carefully worked out with the previous, more moderate Iranian government that balances concessions on both sides. But the European negotiators said that the Iranian proposals, especially on the nuclear issues, simply accepted concessions from Washington while crossing out any on their side, and would eliminate up to 90 percent of what the negotiators had already agreed to before June.

Even the draft text in June left the most difficult issues unresolved, which negotiators estimate at 20 to 30 percent of what would be a complete deal.

If the negotiators now accepted the current Iranian texts as a basis for proceeding, talks would take far too long to complete, while Iran continued to enrich. The Iranians believe that they have increased their leverage by moving so far beyond the limits of the deal, but Western officials say they have miscalculated.

American patience is clearly wearing thin. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said on Thursday after meeting with Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, that Iran’s actions do not bode well, but “it is not too late for Iran to reverse course.”

He said after that meeting, in Stockholm, that “Russia shares our basic perspective on this.” Despite sharp differences over Ukraine and other matters, the two men “noted the importance of continued coordination on issues in the bilateral relationship and where interests are aligned, including when it comes to blocking Iran’s pathways to a nuclear weapon,” the State Department said.

	<p>Mr. Blinken played down a call from the Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, to abandon the negotiations in the face of what he called Iranian blackmail.</p> <p>“In the very near future, the next day or so, we will be in a position to judge whether Iran actually intends now to engage in good faith,” Mr. Blinken said, adding: “I have to tell you, recent moves, recent rhetoric, don’t give us a lot of cause for optimism.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Indonesia deaths, injuries as volcano erupts
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/world/asia/indonesia-mount-semeru-eruption.html
GIST	<p>Searing ash towered in the sky over the Indonesian island of Java on Saturday after the Semeru volcano erupted, killing at least 13 people and injuring dozens of others.</p> <p>At least 41 people suffered burns from the lava flow, Indah Amperawati Masdar, the deputy head of East Java’s Lumajang District, near Mount Semeru, said in a news conference on Saturday.</p> <p>The lava nearly destroyed the village of Curahkobokan and caused a bridge to collapse, making evacuation difficult. On Sunday, the B.N.P.B., Indonesia’s disaster mitigation agency, raised the death toll to 13, from one.</p> <p>Mount Semeru, which last erupted in January, is one of Indonesia’s most active volcanoes and is Java’s tallest mountain. It is among the country’s more than 120 active volcanoes; several hundred others are now considered extinct.</p> <p>Maj. Gen. Suharyanto, the head of the agency, who like many Indonesians goes by a single name, said at the news conference on Saturday that evacuation points had been set up in three nearby villages and in two subdistricts.</p> <p>Several areas were reporting “darkness due to fog from volcanic ash,” the agency said in a statement. But as of late Saturday, air travel remained unaffected, a state-owned air navigation company said.</p> <p>The Volcanic Ash Advisory Center in Darwin, Australia, issued a red aviation warning on Saturday, saying that ash had “detached from the volcano” and that it was moving southwest and west.</p> <p>But the state-owned air navigation company, AirNav Indonesia, said in a statement that no airports or flight routes had been affected by the eruption. Nonetheless, it warned pilots of volcanic ash reaching heights of up to 40,000 feet.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 Omicron spreads quickly South Africa
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/health/coronavirus-omicron-vaccines-contagiousness.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Health
GIST	<p>Underscoring increasing concerns about Omicron, scientists in South Africa said on Friday that the newest coronavirus variant appeared to spread more than twice as quickly as Delta, which had been considered the most contagious version of the virus.</p> <p>Omicron’s rapid spread results from a combination of contagiousness and an ability to dodge the body’s immune defenses, the researchers said. But the contribution of each factor is not yet certain.</p> <p>“We’re not sure what that mixture is,” said Carl Pearson, a mathematical modeler at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine who led the analysis. “It’s possible that it might even be less transmissible than Delta.”</p>

Dr. Pearson [posted the results on Twitter](#). The research has not yet been peer-reviewed nor published in a scientific journal.

On Thursday, researchers reported that the new variant may [partly dodge immunity](#) gained from a previous infection. It's still unclear whether, or to what degree, Omicron may evade protection conferred by the vaccines.

But some experts said they would expect the outcome to be similar.

"It's scary that there are so many reinfections happening, which means that vaccine-induced immunity may also be impacted in similar way," said Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist at Yale.

The Omicron variant has appeared in nearly two dozen countries. The United States has identified at least 10 cases in six states. President Biden reiterated on Friday morning that his administration's newest pandemic measures, which were announced this week, should be sufficient to blunt the spread of Omicron.

The variant was first identified in South Africa on Nov. 23 and has quickly come to account for about three-quarters of new cases in that country. South Africa reported 11,535 new coronavirus cases on Thursday, a 35 percent jump from the day before, and the proportion of positive test results [increased to 22.4 percent](#) from 16.5 percent.

"It is actually really striking how quickly it seems to have taken over," said Juliet Pulliam, the director of an epidemiological modeling center at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, who led the earlier research on immunity.

Omicron cases are doubling roughly every three days in Gauteng province, which is home to South Africa's densely populated economic hub, according to the new estimates by the researchers.

In a mathematical analysis, they estimated the variant's R_t — a measure of how quickly a virus spreads — and compared it with the metric for Delta. They found that Omicron's R_t is nearly 2.5 times as high as that of Delta's.

That figure depends on not just how contagious the variant may be, but also its ability to sidestep the body's immune defenses once it reaches a new host.

Based on the mutations Omicron carries, some researchers had warned that the variant may turn out to be [highly transmissible](#), and that the current vaccines may not be as effective against it as against previous variants.

In the research published on Thursday, Dr. Pulliam and her colleagues estimated the new variant's ability to evade immunity by looking at confirmed cases in the country through late November.

They reported an uptick in reinfections among people who had tested positive for the virus at least 90 days earlier, suggesting that the immunity gained from a previous bout with the virus was no longer as protective as it had appeared. The increase in reinfections coincided with Omicron's spread in the country.

A quirk of Omicron's genetic code made it easy to distinguish the variant from Delta in diagnostic tests, and that helped scientists quickly spot its steep rise, Dr. Pulliam said.

"If we hadn't had that, we probably would be several weeks behind where we are now in terms of recognizing that there was a new variant," she added.

The team did not confirm that the reinfections they observed were caused by the new variant, but said it was a reasonable assumption. A similar spike did not occur when the Beta and Delta variants were dominant, the scientists noted.

Dr. Pulliam and her colleagues estimated that the risk of reinfection with the Omicron variant is roughly 2.4 times the risk seen with the original version of the coronavirus.

Vaccines are thought to produce much higher levels of antibodies in the body, compared with the levels produced from infection with the coronavirus. But antibodies produced after an infection are capable of fending off variants with a wider range of mutations, noted Florian Krammer, an immunologist at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York.

If the new variant is reinfecting people who have recovered from Covid, “I don’t think that there will be much of a difference” in how Omicron responds to vaccines, Dr. Krammer said. “It’s not a good sign.”

South African researchers did not have information on the severity of the first illness compared with the second. But the immune system should be able to prevent most severe symptoms in people who had a previous infection or have been immunized, Dr. Iwasaki said.

“I suspect, and I’m hopeful, that these aren’t all going to result in severe disease,” she said. “Maybe there are lots of infections, but they may be milder.”

The Gauteng province in South Africa is now the epicenter of what scientists say is the country’s fourth wave of infections. The week-on-week increase in hospital admissions is already higher than in previous waves, according to data from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases of South Africa.

“Gauteng was absolutely clobbered by the Delta wave only five months ago, so there’s no doubt that this variant is causing significant numbers of reinfections, due to that fact alone,” said Kristian Andersen, a virologist at the Scripps Research Institute in San Diego.

The percentage of children younger than 5 among total cases has also risen sharply — second only to those over 60 — but that may be because more adults are immunized now than in previous waves.

Pediatricians are also admitting more children to hospitals, but mostly as a precautionary measure, said Dr. Waasila Jassat, a public health specialist at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.

“Later in the wave, they wouldn’t meet the criteria for admission,” Dr. Jassat said. Most hospitalized children are unvaccinated, she said, and live with parents who have also not been immunized.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 US: Russia plans possible Ukraine invasion
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/us/politics/russia-ukraine-biden.html?
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Biden administration’s growing alarm about a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine is based in part on U.S. intelligence that Moscow has drawn up plans for a military offensive involving an estimated 175,000 troops as soon as early next year.</p> <p>An unclassified U.S. intelligence document details some of the intelligence findings, including the positioning of what officials say could eventually be 100 battalion tactical groups, as well as heavy armor, artillery and other equipment.</p> <p>The intelligence was first reported on Friday by The Washington Post.</p> <p>U.S. officials stress that the intentions of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia remain unclear, and the intelligence does not show that he has decided to carry out the apparent war plan.</p> <p>But the intelligence depicts a Russian military machine springing into action and positioning itself for an attack against which experts say Ukraine’s military would stand little chance. About half of the Russian forces that would be used in an invasion are already near Ukraine’s border, and Moscow is moving swiftly</p>

to build up a large force of contract military reservists, according to a Biden administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive intelligence.

A Russian invasion of Ukraine would set off a major national security crisis for Europe and the Biden administration, which has declared an “ironclad commitment” to Ukraine’s borders and independence.

Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, confirmed on Saturday that President Biden and Mr. Putin would hold a secure video call on Tuesday.

Mr. Biden, she said, “will underscore U.S. concerns with Russian military activities on the border with Ukraine and reaffirm the United States’ support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.”

The intelligence document features satellite photos indicating a buildup of Russian troops and equipment near Ukraine’s eastern border, and says that Russian plans involve moving forces to and from Ukraine’s border “to obfuscate intentions and create uncertainty.”

The concern about Mr. Putin’s intentions has been fueled by what U.S. officials call an increase in Russian media disinformation describing NATO and Ukraine as threats to Russia, potentially to create a pretext for a Russian escalation. The administration official said that Russian officials had also proposed information operations within Ukraine portraying that country’s leaders as Western puppets acting against their country’s interests.

“We’ve been aware of Russia’s actions for a long time, and my expectation is we’re going to have a long discussion,” Mr. Biden told reporters Friday night when asked about the possibility of Russia invading Ukraine.

A National Security Council spokesperson said on Friday night that the United States did not seek conflict with Russia and believed diplomacy was the best way to avert a crisis and prevent U.S.-Russian relations from spiraling further downward.

U.S. officials have hinted vaguely in recent days that they have specific reasons for their heightened concern about an invasion of Russia’s neighbor, a former Soviet republic that Mr. Putin considers a rightful part of Russia.

Speaking to reporters in Stockholm, Sweden on Thursday, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken referred to “evidence that Russia has made plans for significant aggressive moves against Ukraine.” Speaking to reporters on his official plane later that day, Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, referred to “warnings from an intelligence standpoint,” saying “there’s enough out there now to cause a lot of concern.”

Mr. Blinken and other U.S. officials have been consulting with U.S. allies in Europe to devise retaliatory measures against possible Russian aggression against Ukraine, where Mr. Putin has long backed a pro-Moscow separatist insurgency and [in 2014 annexed the Crimean Peninsula](#).

Mr. Blinken said this week that the United States would respond to “Russian aggression against Ukraine” with “high-impact economic measures that we’ve refrained from taking in the past,” but did not provide more details.

Mr. Blinken conveyed that warning during a Thursday meeting in Stockholm with Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov. But it is unclear whether Mr. Putin can be deterred by such threats.

Speaking to reporters after his meeting with Mr. Blinken, Mr. Lavrov seemed to scoff at the threat, noting that the United States has repeatedly sanctioned Russia in new and different ways in recent years.

“There’s always a first time,” Mr. Lavrov said. “There were other sanctions they refrained from taking in the past.”

HEADLINE	12/04 DOD secretary: 'America is a Pacific power'
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/us/politics/lloyd-austin-china-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>SIMI VALLEY, Calif. — Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III said on Saturday that the Biden administration would push both allies in the Pacific and U.S. businesses to step up efforts to counter the increasingly urgent threat of China, and that the Pentagon was prepared to help Ukraine better defend itself against Russia as tensions flare between the two countries.</p> <p>“America is a Pacific power,” Mr. Austin declared during a speech at the annual Reagan National Defense Forum, the first in-person meeting of defense officials and experts since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. “We’re not asking countries to choose between the United States and China. Instead, we’re working to advance an international system that is free and stable and open.”</p> <p>In one of his most prominent speeches since the United States pulled troops out of Afghanistan, bringing a chaotic end to America’s longest war, Mr. Austin made little mention of the past two decades of U.S. military efforts in the Middle East, turning the focus instead almost exclusively on Beijing, whose nuclear, cyber and economic gains have increasingly rattled American officials over three administrations.</p> <p>He offered the broad outlines of his strategy for dealing with China, something he called “integrated deterrence,” which relies on both strengthening work with allies and partners in the region and pushing the U.S. technology industry to keep ahead of Chinese innovations.</p> <p>The Biden administration has carefully tried to both insist that the United States is not in conflict with China, and acknowledge that the competition between the two countries has intensified. President Biden has declined to lift tariffs initiated by the Trump administration and has continued to push China to uphold commitments it had agreed to as part of a trade deal signed during the final days of the Trump administration.</p> <p>In panel after panel on Saturday at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, military officials and defense and national security experts rang alarm bells about China, including its increasing military power and its attacks on American satellite, as well as economic concerns such as the lack of skilled American workers to keep up with Chinese production and dominance, especially in semiconductors.</p> <p>“There is a real possibility if we ever got into a conflict, you could see attacks on our power grid or transportation sector,” warned Christine Wormuth, the secretary of the Army.</p> <p>At the same time, speakers also expressed concern that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia might exploit the United States’ intense focus on China to quietly pursue his own ambitions in his region.</p> <p>A new report from American intelligence agencies shows Russia has drawn up plans to possibly invade Ukraine with as many as 175,000 forces as soon as early next year. Intelligence officials do not believe Mr. Putin has made a decision on whether to attack Ukraine, but the threat of a renewed invasion has become more acute.</p> <p>Mr. Austin noted that Russia had invaded Ukraine before, a reference to 2014 when Moscow annexed Crimea and its military directed pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>The current troop buildup in the border region, as well as Russian disinformation activity and cyberoperations, are all concerning to the United States, Mr. Austin said.</p> <p>“We remain focused on this,” Mr. Austin said. “We are certainly committed to helping Ukraine defend its sovereign territory.”</p> <p>The Biden administration has been trying to use concerns over both Russia’s and China’s intentions to bolster support among allies.</p>

In his remarks, Mr. Austin stressed that the United States did not intend to build a new NATO for Asia. Rather, Washington is trying to better coordinate countries to block efforts by China to dominate the region, he said, pointing to the recent deal to help Australia deploy nuclear-powered submarine as an example of strengthening alliances.

“They are moving on their goals,” David H. Berger, commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, said of China. “We have to operate in a different way.”

The so-called pacing challenge of China — a phrase often used in American policy circles to denote that nation’s steadily increasing military threat — has become of largely bipartisan interest in Congress.

In June, the Senate overwhelmingly passed a bill to spend nearly a quarter-trillion dollars to ignite scientific innovation to better compete with China, a level of investment that proponents say will be comparable to Cold War-era spending if the House follows suit.

There was roughly an equal number of congressional Democrats and Republicans at the forum and all expressed similar concerns.

“We need to be there,” said Senator Tammy Duckworth, Democrat of Illinois, who stressed the need to invest in partners in the region. Some Republicans, however, were critical of Mr. Biden’s policies thus far toward China, particularly around what they view as a lack of punitive measures over the country’s role in the pandemic. “President Biden has to be much more aggressive,” Senator Joni Ernst, Republican of Iowa, said.

Although Mr. Austin said U.S. tech firms needed to help the country keep ahead of Chinese know-how, he acknowledged that the Pentagon risked falling behind China in various areas if it did not find ways to work better with Silicon Valley.

“The barriers to entry for working in national security are often just too steep,” Mr. Austin said.

Amid all of the talk of future threats and partnerships within the crowd of senior Pentagon officials, policy experts and business leaders, there was little reflection on the past two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When pressed after his speech about his regrets over the Afghanistan withdrawal, Mr. Austin was silent for several seconds, before saying that he regretted the loss of lives of Marines and of civilians killed in an errant drone strike. “I want to make sure that we don’t lost sight of the fact that our American forces in 17 days evacuated 124,000 people from Afghanistan,” he added.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 Myanmar military vehicle plows protesters
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/world/asia/myanmar-car-protesters-killed.html
GIST	<p>A military vehicle drove through a group of protesters in Myanmar on Sunday, resulting in fatalities and leaving at least eight people injured, according to the local news media, witnesses and video footage from the scene.</p> <p>The incident occurred on Sunday morning in Yangon, Myanmar’s most populous city. Soldiers fired into the group, according to two eyewitnesses. A video of the incident included the sound of gunfire, but it wasn’t clear who or what was being fired upon.</p> <p>There were conflicting reports on fatalities. The Irrawaddy and Myanmar Now, two news outlets that cover Myanmar, reported that four protesters had died. One witness said the soldiers had also kicked the wounded protesters and arrested several others.</p>

The excessive force used by the military as it has tried to quell protests against [a Feb. 1 coup](#) has [infuriated people throughout the country](#) and could very well spur more demonstrations. Despite the harsh punishments meted out by the junta, [hundreds of people have organized flash mob protests](#) — including the one on Sunday — in cities and villages across the country to [show opposition to military rule](#).

On Sunday, the demonstrators had gathered between 8 and 9 a.m. in the western part of Yangon. They marched through the streets, holding a banner with a portrait of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's ousted civilian leader, who was detained in the coup. Another banner carried a quote of hers: "The only real prison is fear, and the real freedom is freedom from fear."

The protest came a day before a court is expected to deliver the first of several verdicts against Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, who is facing 11 charges and a maximum imprisonment of 102 years.

On Sunday, the protesters held up their hands in a three-fingered salute that originated in the "Hunger Games" series and is used universally in Myanmar as a symbol of resistance against the military. According to video footage, they yelled "Return back the people's power" and "Free all political prisoners." An eyewitness said there were roughly 30 people in the flash mob.

Videos posted on social media showed the military truck accelerating through the group as several protesters ran in the opposite direction. Photos showed a body lying in the middle of the road and scattered roses on the ground, with several injured people sitting on the side.

One of the injured protesters, who asked not to be named, fearing official retribution, said the protesters had been caught unaware because the military vehicle suddenly overtook a bus, which was right behind the protesters.

When the vehicle plowed into the group, the injured protester said, he fell on the hood of the vehicle and a soldier struck his head with the butt of his gun. He said he kicked the soldier, who fired in his direction but missed.

In the aftermath, soldiers flooded the streets of Yangon. One photo showed a soldier standing over a protester, who knelt in front of a sign that said "The Yangon People's Revolution cannot be defeated."

On Sunday afternoon, dozens of people gathered in Yangon, carrying umbrellas in the rain and singing a lullaby in tribute to the protesters who had died. All of them held up three fingers.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Michigan shooting: school responsibility?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/us/oxford-high-school-responsibility-legal.html
GIST	<p>First, a teacher found Ethan Crumbley searching online for ammunition. The next day, there was an alarming note on his desk: "The thoughts won't stop. Help me."</p> <p>School officials met with Mr. Crumbley, 15, and his parents, informing them that he needed to begin counseling within 48 hours. After his parents resisted bringing him home, administrators allowed him to stay in school.</p> <p>Shortly afterward, Mr. Crumbley fatally shot four students, according to the prosecutor in Oakland County, Mich., who laid out that stunning series of events on Friday while announcing involuntary manslaughter charges against the parents.</p> <p>Now, Oxford High School's actions are also under a microscope, prompting questions about the school's responsibility, and whether there could be legal repercussions for administrators. Asked if her office was looking into the conduct of school officials, Karen M. McDonald, the prosecutor, said, "The investigation is ongoing."</p>

Catherine J. Ross, a law professor at George Washington University and expert on student rights, said she found the school's reaction "truly astounding."

It was well within the school's rights to require Mr. Crumbley, who has since pleaded not guilty to [murder and terrorism charges](#), to leave campus, Professor Ross said.

If the parents refused to take Mr. Crumbley home, it was the legal and ethical responsibility of the school, Professor Ross said, to "remove the student from the classroom and put them in a safe place — safe for other people and safe for themselves."

School officials have defended their actions. [In a videotaped statement](#) posted online on Thursday, the superintendent of Oxford Community Schools, Tim Throne, said that Mr. Crumbley had no disciplinary history. "No discipline was warranted," Mr. Throne said. "There are no discipline records at the high school."

But Ms. McDonald suggested there were unanswered questions.

When asked whether the school staff should have reported Mr. Crumbley right away to law enforcement, she said: "Any individual who had the opportunity to stop this tragedy should have done so. The question is what did they know and when did they know it."

A spokeswoman for the district did not respond to requests for comment on Friday.

Chris Dorn, a school safety consultant with the nonprofit Safe Havens International, said it was advisable for schools to call law enforcement if there was suspicion that a student might be armed.

Mr. Dorn has conducted investigations into lapses that led to past school shootings, finding that administrators sometimes worry that calling the police will violate a student's rights. Other times, they have simply failed to take a threat seriously enough.

"Part of it is that people are just generally nonconfrontational," Mr. Dorn said. "School staff are often slow to recognize danger because it's not part of their everyday."

While Oxford High School [conducted active shooter drills several times per year](#), "There is a lot of focus on responding to the active shooter, but not necessarily on the prevention for them," he added.

It is historically very challenging to hold a school district legally responsible for a shooting, said Chuck Vergon, a professor of education law at Youngstown State University.

A majority of past school shooting cases featured some kind of warning in advance of potential violence, he said. But it is difficult in most state courts to meet the required standard of proving gross negligence on the part of school officials — that they acted in "wanton and willful disregard" for the safety or well-being of others, he said. "That standard has usually shielded school officials in most school shooting cases from civil liability."

But the Oxford school system will most likely face years of litigation over the shooting, if recent history is any guide.

"I definitely think that there's going to be a lawsuit," said Mike Kelly, a lawyer in Northville, Mich., who specializes in representing students who face school expulsion — including one student who recently faced expulsion by another Michigan district for having a hunting rifle in the car he parked on school grounds.

"There is some culpability and responsibility here on the part of the school," Mr. Kelly said.

In one notable case, when a substitute teacher was told of a threat but failed to take action, the insurance company for Marysville School District in Washington paid \$18 million to the families of four dead students, as well as to one student who was injured.

While school district settlements are not rare, victims' families face obstacles.

In 2018, a judge in Connecticut threw out claims filed by the parents of two victims of the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre, in which 20 first graders and six adults were killed. The judge concluded the school district was immune from such lawsuits.

This year, schools in Broward County, Fla., [reached a \\$25 million settlement](#) with both survivors and families of the victims of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, which left 17 people dead and another 17 wounded. The settlement followed a court decision capping the school system's liability at \$300,000 had the victims won at trial.

In the Michigan shooting, a potential lawsuit would probably turn on the question of whether the school took strong enough action to protect students after a teacher happened to see Mr. Crumbley's disturbing drawing, which included a gun, a person who had been shot and a plea for help.

The fact that Mr. Crumbley was said to have no disciplinary record creates what Mr. Kelly called "a gray area" and could become pivotal in any lawsuit claiming the school was culpable because it failed to remove him from campus.

Shannon Watts, founder of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, said school officials should have searched Mr. Crumbley's bag for weapons.

But she said that the steps to prevent gun violence begin far before someone brings a weapon onto school grounds. Ultimately it is lawmakers, not school officials, she argued, who have the power to prevent shootings by passing secure gun storage laws or red flag laws, which allow the police to temporarily confiscate firearms from people who are deemed by a judge to be a danger to themselves or others.

"You're putting educators in an impossible position because they don't really have the tools to proactively prevent guns from coming into the school," Ms. Watts said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Omicron variant: new iteration coronavirus
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/article/omicron-coronavirus-variant.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article
GIST	<p>What is the Omicron variant?</p> <p>First identified in Botswana and South Africa, this new iteration of the coronavirus has prompted concern among scientists and public health officials because of an unusually high number of mutations that have the potential to make the virus more transmissible and less susceptible to existing vaccines.</p> <p>The World Health Organization has called Omicron a "variant of concern" and warned that the global risks posed by it were "very high," despite what officials described as a multitude of uncertainties. Cases have been identified in dozens of countries on every continent except Antarctica.</p> <p>What do we know about Omicron's presence in the U.S.?</p> <p>It's too early to say how widespread the variant will become in the United States. As of Dec. 4, cases have been identified in more than a dozen states, but experts say that number is likely to increase in the coming days and weeks. The first person to have tested positive for the variant returned to San Francisco from South Africa on Nov. 22 and tested positive on Nov. 29, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Should we be worried?</p>

Omicron's discovery has prompted considerable panic across the globe, with a number of countries banning flights from southern Africa, or — like Israel, Japan and Morocco — barring entry of foreign travelers altogether.

But public health experts have urged caution, noting that there is as yet no firm evidence that Omicron is more dangerous than previous variants like Delta, which quickly overtook its predecessors in the United States and other countries.

Although Delta turned out to be much more transmissible than prior variants — and there is some data suggesting it can cause more severe illness in the unvaccinated — there is little evidence it is more lethal or capable of outsmarting vaccines.

Much remains unknown about Omicron, including whether it is more transmissible and capable of causing more serious illness. There is some evidence the variant can reinfect people more readily. In South Africa, where Omicron is already the dominant form of the virus, scientists have reported a sudden, sharp rise last month in coronavirus cases among people who had already been infected, in [a study](#) that has not yet been reviewed and published by a scientific journal. The authors noted that there was no such upswing when the Beta and Delta variants emerged.

The finding hints that Omicron may be less vulnerable to the body's immune defenses. Researchers in South Africa also reported that the variant appears to be spreading more than twice as quickly as Delta, which had been considered the most contagious form of the virus.

There are some early signs that Omicron may cause only mild illness. But that observation was based mainly on South Africa's cases among young people, who are less likely overall to become severely ill from Covid.

Dr. Angelique Coetzee, who chairs the South African Medical Association, said that the nation's hospitals were not overwhelmed by patients infected with the new variant, and most of those hospitalized were not fully immunized. Moreover, most patients she had seen did not lose their sense of taste and smell, and had only a slight cough.

On Tuesday, [Regeneron said its Covid antibody treatment](#) might be less effective against Omicron, an indication that the [popular and widely beneficial monoclonal antibody drugs](#) may need to be updated if the new variant spreads aggressively.

That said, Omicron's emergence is so recent that it may be a while before experts know whether it is more pathogenic. Covid hospitalizations lag new infections by two weeks or more.

Scientists expect to learn much more in the coming weeks. At the moment, they say there is no reason to believe Omicron is impervious to existing vaccines, although they may turn out to be less protective to some unknown degree.

There's another reason to remain calm: Vaccine makers have expressed confidence they can tweak existing formulations to make the shots more effective against new variants. Also reassuring: Omicron's distinctive mutations make it easy to quickly identify with a nasal swab and lab test.

Why are scientists so concerned about Omicron?

As the coronavirus replicates inside people, new mutations constantly arise. Most provide the virus with no new advantage, but sometimes mutations can give the pathogen a leg up by allowing it spread more readily among its human hosts or dodge the body's immune response.

Researchers in South Africa sounded the alarm because they found more than 30 mutations in the spike protein, a component on the surface of the virus that allows it to bind to human cells and gain entry to the body. Some of the samples from Botswana shared about 50 mutations throughout the virus not previously found in combination.

The spike protein is the chief target of antibodies that the immune system produces to fight a Covid-19 infection. Having so many mutations raises concerns that Omicron's spike might be able to somewhat evade antibodies produced by either previous infection or vaccination.

Those mutations also raise the prospect that the variant will reduce the efficacy of monoclonal antibody treatments — a fear partly confirmed on Tuesday with Regeneron's announcement.

Still, it is worth remembering the fate of earlier variants that stirred concern: Beta and Mu, for example, evolved the ability to partially evade the body's immune defenses, but they never became a serious threat to the world because they proved to be poor at transmitting.

What about vaccines?

Vaccines are expected to provide some protection against Omicron because they stimulate not only antibodies but other immune cells that attack virus-infected cells. Mutations to the spike protein do not blunt that response, which most experts believe is instrumental in preventing serious illness and death. Citing the potential for waning immunity six months or more after vaccination, some health experts are promoting booster shots to increase antibody levels.

Dr. Fauci has urged people to get a booster shot, which he said would most likely provide additional protection against severe disease. "We've said it over and over again and it deserves repeating. If you're not vaccinated, get vaccinated, get boosted if you are vaccinated, continue to use the mitigation methods, namely masks, avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces," he said on Tuesday.

Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech and Johnson & Johnson, makers of vaccines approved for use in the United States, and AstraZeneca, which is widely used in Europe, have all said they were studying Omicron, and they expressed confidence in their ability to tailor their formulations to target the variant.

Why is it called Omicron?

When the W.H.O. began to name emerging variants of the coronavirus, they turned to [the Greek alphabet](#) — Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and so on — to make them easier to describe. The first "variant of concern," Alpha, was identified in Britain in late 2020, soon followed by Beta in South Africa.

But veterans of American sorority and fraternity life might have noticed the system has skipped the next two letters in the alphabetical order: Nu and Xi.

Officials thought Nu would be too easily confused with "new," but the next letter, Xi, is a bit more complicated. W.H.O. officials said it was a common last name, and therefore potentially confusing. Some noted that it is also the name of China's top leader, Xi Jinping.

A spokesman for the W.H.O. said the organization's policy was designed to avoid "causing offense to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional, or ethnic groups."

Next in line? Omicron. (Here's [how it's pronounced](#), [and here](#).)

I'm fully vaccinated — I've even had my booster. So why should I care about Omicron?

Like Delta, which was first identified in India, the rise of yet another worrisome variant in the developing world points to a more fundamental problem facing the global community more than a year-and-a-half into the pandemic.

The hoarding of vaccines by wealthy countries while poorer nations struggle to obtain them provides more opportunities for SARS CoV-2 to replicate and mutate among the unvaccinated. More mutations mean there are more chances for the virus to become more infectious, immune-resistant or lethal. And as the rapid spread of Delta showed, a dangerous new variant is unlikely to remain in one place for very long.

	<p>The risks extend beyond public health. The resulting economic devastation from a new variant can hit affluent countries nearly as hard as those in the developing world. One academic study estimated trillions of dollars in economic loss to wealthy countries when residents of poorer countries remain largely unvaccinated.</p> <p>In recent days, the cascade of travel restrictions prompted by Omicron's emergence has triggered resentment among Africans, who believe the continent is yet again bearing the brunt of panicked policies in Western countries that have failed to deliver vaccines and the resources needed to administer them.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, head of the W.H.O., described the travel bans as unfair and counterproductive. "I well understand the concern of all countries to protect their citizens against a variant that we don't yet fully understand," he said.</p> <p>"But I am equally concerned that several member states are introducing blunt, blanket measures that are not evidence-based or effective on their own, and which will only worsen inequities."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Britain omicron cases; tightens restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/04/world/omicron-variant-covid#britain-omicron-cases-restrictions
GIST	<p>As the number of confirmed cases of the Omicron coronavirus variant rose to 160 in Britain, the government on Saturday announced further tightening of travel restrictions to combat its spread.</p> <p>Beginning Tuesday, travelers will be required to take a coronavirus test within 48 hours of traveling to Britain regardless of their vaccination status. Britain will also impose restrictions on travelers from Nigeria, the country's health secretary said in a statement. Nigeria announced on Wednesday that it had detected the variant in three travelers who arrived from South Africa in November, according to Dr. Ifedayo Adetifa, the director general of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.</p> <p>The two additional measures being imposed by Britain are the latest to come after a week of heightened concern led to the introduction of a number of restrictions intended to slow the incursion of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>At the moment, travelers are required to self-isolate and take a coronavirus test on the second day after arriving. If that test is negative, they can end their isolation. If not, they are expected to remain in self-isolation until they do get a negative result.</p> <p>There are now 160 confirmed cases of the Omicron variant across Britain, Britain's Health Security Agency confirmed on Saturday, up from 134 cases reported by the agency on Friday. Britain is considered a leader in genomic sequencing and testing, with a well-run national program to track coronavirus mutations, so it has an advantage in tracking the variant's spread.</p> <p>"We've kept the data under review over the last week or so since we learned about Omicron," Sajid Javid, the country's health secretary, said during a news briefing. "And we're seeing an increasing number of cases linked to travel."</p> <p>He stressed that the new containment measures are temporary, but he added that "before we learn more about Omicron, it's right that we have these measures in place."</p> <p>Mr. Javid was also clear that the government was advising the British public to continue with life as usual while adhering to coronavirus guidelines.</p> <p>"People should carry on with their plans, and make plans to enjoy Christmas as usual," he said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Vaccine demand and wait times grow
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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/04/world/omicron-variant-covid#vaccine-demand-grows-in-the-us-and-so-do-wait-times
GIST	<p>Many vaccination clinics and local officials are reporting long lines and delays in booking vaccination appointments recently, the product of expanded eligibility on booster shots and fears of the Omicron variant, experts said.</p> <p>The stresses on the U.S. vaccination program are also worsened by the broader labor shortage that is affecting many sectors, including health care.</p> <p>“What the public needs to keep in mind is that we’ve got a stressed and strained health care delivery system,” said Mitchel Rothholz, the lead for immunization policy at the American Pharmacists Association.</p> <p>Vaccine demand has spiked from an average of under a million doses a day for much of October to an average of 1.5 million a day in recent weeks, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Demand for boosters and first time doses seems to be driving that increase.</p> <p>Mr. Rothholz said that he has noticed that pharmacies are moving more to an appointment-based model with the uptick in demand, similar to when vaccines were first rolled out and there was a crush to get them. This means that people wanting a vaccine may need to plan ahead of time and could have to wait a few more days.</p> <p>“We’ve got to go to a system where we can manage expectations,” he said.</p> <p>The Biden administration is trying to make getting vaccinated easier. In announcing actions Thursday to protect against Delta and Omicron, President Biden said the government would create hundreds of family-vaccination clinics, one-stop shops for first shots and boosters. Partners in a federal pharmacy program, including major chains like CVS and Rite Aid, will also make “family-based scheduling” available in the months ahead, according to the White House.</p> <p>Since the emergence of the Omicron variant, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that everyone ages 18 and older should get a booster shot, six months after a Pfizer or Moderna series or two months after a Johnson & Johnson shot.</p> <p>Dr. Leana Wen, a public health professor at George Washington University, said there are some pockets of the country where vaccines are expiring because demand is low and others where lines are longer than a month ago because of greater demand.</p> <p>But, she said, demand will likely ease in a few weeks.</p> <p>“Whenever there is a new recommendation, there are the early adopters who are extremely eager to want to get that booster right now,” she said, adding that “supply and demand will equilibrate in short order.”</p> <p>Some states and counties have hosted mass-vaccination clinics to alleviate the burden on pharmacies and meet demand from residents.</p> <p>Richard Clark, the director of emergency management for Bernalillo County, which includes Albuquerque, said the county had been running vaccination clinics that would attract about 300 or 400 people each time. Mr. Clark said he kept hearing comments about people driving from counties an hour away to get their vaccine, because they were worried about the upcoming holidays and virus variants.</p> <p>“We decided, let’s just do a large one,” he said, “and our 1,000 slots were filled within probably a day and a half.”</p> <p>Gov. Charlie Baker, of Massachusetts, said this week that demand for vaccines skyrocketed after boosters became widely available.</p>

	<p>“We are doing over 50,000 shots per day,” Mr. Baker said, according to a Boston 25 News story published on Tuesday, “and if we can find a way to work with our local colleagues in local government, we will come up with ways to put more shots on the table.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Switzerland backtracks foreign travel rules
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/04/world/omicron-variant-covid#switzerland-quarantine-travel-omicron
GIST	<p>Switzerland on Saturday dialed back pandemic travel rules announced just a week ago, removing the obligation for some foreign visitors to quarantine for 10 days upon arrival, a requirement that created havoc in the country’s crucial tourism industry.</p> <p>The turnaround comes after travel operators from countries such as Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Canada reported mass cancellations from people who had booked trips to Switzerland over the Christmas vacation season. The Swiss quarantine was ordered in response to concerns over the new Omicron variant of the coronavirus, which has been detected in a handful of cases in the country, according to Reuters.</p> <p>In eliminating the compulsory quarantine, however, the Swiss government is tightening other measures. All visitors will now have to be tested for the coronavirus both before entering the country and between four and seven days after their arrival in Switzerland. The Swiss are also requiring all visitors from regions that it considers to be of high risk to be fully vaccinated. Earlier this week, Switzerland banned all direct flights from southern Africa, where the variant was first identified.</p> <p>The Swiss are also expanding a requirement for wearing face masks to all indoor public events, concert halls and sports venues, and for having to show a Covid-19 vaccination passport to enter public establishments like restaurants or museums.</p> <p>The latest changes in Switzerland’s rules come after more than 60 percent of Swiss voters last Sunday approved their government’s Covid policies in a referendum, including the requirement to show the vaccination passport. The referendum had been called by opponents of lockdown measures who consider them a violation of individual rights.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Vienna: 40,000 protest Covid restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/04/world/omicron-variant-covid#austria-vienna-covid-protest
GIST	<p>Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Vienna on Saturday, the second weekend of mass protesting over the Austrian government’s decision to impose a tough new lockdown and plan a sweeping nationwide vaccine mandate in the fight against a sharp surge in coronavirus cases and rising deaths.</p> <p>The crowd was over 40,000 strong, the Vienna police said in a tweet, and around 1,500 people staged counterprotests. The demonstration was largely peaceful, but the police reported that some protesters had thrown pyrotechnic objects. There were some arrests, and the police said they used pepper spray to try to disperse the crowds.</p> <p>The far-right Freedom Party, the third-largest group in Parliament, has led the opposition to the new pandemic measures. The party has amplified conspiracy theories about the vaccines, spreading doubt about their effectiveness, while promoting ivermectin, a drug typically used to deworm animals that has repeatedly failed against the coronavirus in clinical trials. People carried signs that read, “I will decide for myself,” and “Make Austria Great Again,” according to Reuters.</p> <p>Protesters gathered elsewhere in Europe on Saturday, notably in the Netherlands. Several thousand people gathered in the central Dutch town of Utrecht, 30 miles south of Amsterdam, to protest against new coronavirus restrictions on businesses that will be in place until Dec. 19. Two weeks earlier, Dutch marches turned violent over the government’s plan to ban most unvaccinated people from bars, restaurants and other public places.</p>

	<p>Cases have fallen sharply in Austria since Nov. 22, when it became the first country in Western Europe to reimpose a lockdown, allowing people to leave home only to go to work or to procure groceries or medicine. A surge that began in the summer had quickly escalated, giving Austria its highest caseload of the pandemic and rising deaths. The lockdown is set to last until mid-December.</p> <p>The moves come after months of struggling attempts to halt the contagion through widespread testing and partial restrictions. Austria had originally placed a lockdown on only those who were unvaccinated.</p> <p>Austria has also announced that vaccination would become compulsory as of Feb. 1, making it the first Western country to take that step, and one of only a handful around the world. Some critics, including the editorial board of The Financial Times, have said the plan exacts too high a price in terms of individual freedom and see it a sign of political failure.</p> <p>On Saturday, Austria was averaging more than 9,000 new cases daily, and average daily Covid deaths had reached more than 58, after falling to near zero during the summer, according to the Our World in Data project at Oxford University. About 67 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, a lower level than many of its Western European neighbors, but higher than many in the former Eastern bloc.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	11/04 Omicron plunges world into uncertainty
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/04/world/omicron-variant-covid#in-one-week-omicron-plunged-the-world-into-collective-uncertainty
GIST	<p>The global pandemic response has transformed with dizzying speed since scientists in Botswana and South Africa, alarmed by dozens of mutations never seen before, started studying the Omicron variant.</p> <p>In just 36 hours, researchers analyzed samples from 100 infected patients, collated the data and, as Americans were enjoying Thanksgiving, alerted the world, setting off new rounds of travel restrictions and adding new uncertainty about the trajectory of a pandemic that has upended the world for almost two years.</p> <p>Omicron has reached more than 40 countries, though most of the cases so far have been found in arriving travelers. According to scientists in South Africa, Omicron appears to spread faster than any other variant, thanks to a combination of contagiousness and an ability to dodge the body's immune defenses. But the contribution of each factor is not yet certain.</p> <p>International concern has not waited for a fuller picture to take shape. The World Health Organization acted with alacrity. In an emergency meeting the day after South Africa flagged the variant, the W.H.O. labeled Omicron a "variant of concern," its most serious category, a distinction it shares with the Delta variant that emerged last spring.</p> <p>Even before the W.H.O. meeting was over, more than 10 countries, including the United States, had announced they would close their borders to travelers from southern Africa. Japan, Israel and Morocco went a step further, sealing themselves off completely to foreign travelers.</p> <p>The discovery of Omicron prompted a swift reconsideration of the need for booster shots. On Monday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention strengthened its guidance by urging all eligible adults to get their third shot.</p> <p>Vaccine makers said they were confident they could tailor existing formulas to defend against the variant, but the process was expected to take months. Scientists in South Africa reported an increase in reinfections in people who already had a bout of Covid, suggesting that the variant could overcome natural immunity.</p>

Omicron was soon found in several European countries, including the United Kingdom, as well as in Australia, Israel and Hong Kong. By Tuesday, with cases documented in at least 20 countries, health officials said [the variant had been in Europe](#) several days earlier than previously known.

The first United States case of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus was reported [in California on Wednesday](#) in a San Francisco resident who had recently traveled to South Africa. Since then, it has been identified in at least 11 other states, from Hawaii to New York. Officials are bracing for more community spread, having identified at [least one case stemming from domestic travel](#) and another with no recent travel history.

On Thursday, [President Biden announced a broader strategy](#) to fight the pandemic that goes beyond vaccines to underscore frequent testing as an essential mitigation tool. The new plan includes reimbursing the 150 million Americans with private insurance for at-home tests starting early next year.

To ensure access for those who lack insurance, or who are covered by Medicaid, the administration intends to distribute an additional 25 million tests to community health centers and rural clinics.

The president also rolled out stricter testing requirements for international fliers to the United States, requiring a negative result from a test taken within 24 hours of departure. Mask mandates for travelers were extended until mid-March.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Detection omicron expands across states
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/04/world/omicron-variant-covid#us-states-omicron-cases
GIST	<p>At least two dozen cases of people infected with the highly mutated Omicron variant of the coronavirus had been reported in 12 states by Saturday morning.</p> <p>Most of the cases appeared to be people who had traveled to South Africa recently, though the infected person in Hawaii had not traveled outside of his state, and, in Minnesota, a vaccinated man who had traveled to an anime convention in New York City tested positive. Regardless, health officials were bracing for the inevitable community spread of the variant.</p> <p>None of the Omicron cases reported so far in the United States have resulted in serious illness, hospitalization or death.</p> <p>Even as concerns about the Omicron variant intensified, top federal health officials said that for now the Delta variant remained a greater threat to Americans.</p> <p>“I know the news is focused on Omicron, but we should remember that 99.9 percent of cases in the country right now are from the Delta variant,” Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said in a press briefing on Friday. “Delta continues to drive cases across the country, especially in those that are unvaccinated.”</p> <p>About 95,000 cases were being reported in the United States every day, compared with about 12,000 per day six months ago. States in the Midwest are recording some of the biggest spikes, while New Hampshire, Michigan and Minnesota lead the country in recent cases per capita.</p> <p>On Friday, state health officials confirmed three cases in Maryland, all in the Baltimore area. Two of the cases are from the same household and include a vaccinated individual who had recently traveled to South Africa and an unvaccinated person who was deemed a close contact. The third case is unrelated, and the patient, who was vaccinated, has no known recent travel history.</p> <p>Officials in Philadelphia said that they had found one case, a man in his 30s. The sole case identified in Utah was a vaccinated individual who had just returned from South Africa. In Missouri, officials identified a case linked to domestic travel.</p>

Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey said that a fully vaccinated woman who had recently traveled to South Africa tested positive for the Omicron variant after being treated at an emergency department in northern New Jersey. She was in isolation with mild symptoms, officials said.

On Thursday, officials in New York State announced that [they had confirmed five cases](#) of the variant: a 67-year-old woman in Suffolk County who returned from South Africa; two residents of Queens; one resident of Brooklyn; and another person in New York City who had traveled recently. The vaccination status of most of the individuals remained unknown.

A vaccinated Colorado resident who had recently returned from southern Africa was that state's first confirmed case. California reported a second case — the first being in San Francisco on Wednesday — in Los Angeles County. The infected person had been vaccinated and had traveled to South Africa in November.

The authorities [in Nebraska on Friday said that of the six cases](#) involving the Omicron variant found there, only one was in a vaccinated person. One of the infected people had returned from Nigeria on Nov. 23, they said, and the other five were likely exposed through household contact. None had required hospitalization.

An Oahu resident with no history of travel is the first Omicron case in Hawaii.

"This is a case of community spread," the state's department of health said [in a news release](#). The individual had previously been infected with the coronavirus but was never vaccinated.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 South Africa effort stanch virus mutations
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/health/covid-variant-south-africa-hiv.html
GIST	<p>NTUZUMA, South Africa — A few months ago, Sizakele Mathe, a community health worker in this sprawling hillside township on the edge of the city of Durban, was notified by a clinic that a neighbor had stopped picking up her medication. It was a warning sign that she had likely stopped taking the antiretroviral tablet that suppresses her H.I.V. infection.</p> <p>That was a threat to her own health — and, in the era of Covid-19, it might have posed a risk to everyone else's. The clinic dispatched Ms. Mathe to climb a hill, wend her way down a narrow path and try to get the woman back on the pills.</p> <p>Ms. Mathe, as cheerful as she is relentless, is part of a national door-to-door nagging campaign. It's half of a sophisticated South African effort to stanch the emergence of new variants of the coronavirus, like Omicron, which was identified here and shook the world this past week.</p> <p>The other half takes place at a state-of-the-art laboratory 25 miles down the road. At the KwaZulu-Natal Research Innovation and Sequencing Platform in Durban, scientists sequence the genomes of thousands of coronavirus samples each week. The KRISP lab, as it is known, is part of a national network of virus researchers that identified both the Beta and Omicron variants, drawing on expertise developed here during the region's decades-long fight with H.I.V.</p> <p>This combination of high tech and grassroots represents one of the front lines in the world's battle against the evolving coronavirus. On Friday, the research network in South Africa reported to a world waiting anxiously for new information that the new variant appeared to spread twice as quickly as Delta, which had been considered the most contagious version of the virus.</p> <p>The researchers at KRISP are global leaders in viral phylogenetics, the study of the evolutionary relationship between viruses. They track mutations in the coronavirus, identify hot spots of transmission</p>

and provide crucial data on who is infecting whom — which they deduce by tracking mutations in the virus across samples — to help tamp down the spread.

Since the start of the pandemic, they have been closely scrutinizing how the virus changes in South Africa because they are worried about one thing in particular: the eight million people in the country (13 percent of the population) who live with H.I.V.

When people with H.I.V. are prescribed an effective antiretroviral and take it consistently, their bodies almost completely suppress the virus. But if people with H.I.V. aren't diagnosed, haven't been prescribed treatment, or don't, or can't, take their medicines consistently each day, H.I.V. weakens their immune systems. And then, if they catch the coronavirus, it can take weeks or months before the new virus is cleared from their bodies.

When the coronavirus lives that long in their systems, it has the chance to mutate and mutate and mutate again. And, if they pass the mutated virus on, a new variant is in circulation.

“We have reasons to believe that some of the variants that are emerging in South Africa could potentially be associated directly with H.I.V.,” said Tulio de Oliveira, the principal investigator of the national genetic monitoring network.

In the first days of the pandemic, South Africa's health authorities were braced for soaring death rates of people with H.I.V. “We were basically creating horror scenarios that Africa was going to be decimated,” said Salim Abdool Karim, an epidemiologist who heads the AIDS institute where KRISP is housed. “But none of that played out.” The main reason is that H.I.V. is most common among young people, while the coronavirus has hit older people hardest.

An H.I.V. infection makes a person about 1.7 times as likely to die of Covid — an elevated risk, but one that pales in comparison with the risk for people with diabetes, who are 30 times more likely to die. “Once we realized that this was the situation, we then began to understand that our real problems with H.I.V. in the midst of Covid was the prospect that severely immunocompromised people would lead to new variants,” Dr. Abdool Karim said.

Researchers at KRISP have shown that this has happened at least twice. Last year, they traced a virus sample to a 36-year-old woman with H.I.V. who was on an ineffective treatment regimen and who was not being helped to find drugs that she could tolerate. She took 216 days to clear the coronavirus from her system; in that time inside her body, the viruses acquired 32 different mutations.

In November, Dr. de Oliveira and his team traced a coronavirus sample with dozens of mutations to a different part of the country, the Western Cape, where another patient was also poorly adhering to the H.I.V. drug regimen. The coronavirus lingered in her body for months and produced dozens of mutations. When these women were prescribed effective drugs and counseled on how to take them properly, they cleared the virus quickly.

“We don't have a lot of people like her,” Dr. Abdool Karim said of the woman who took 216 days to clear the coronavirus from her system. “But it doesn't take a lot of people, it just takes one or two.” And a single variant can rattle the world, as Omicron has.

The origin of this variant is still unknown. People with H.I.V. are not the only ones whose systems can inadvertently give the coronavirus the chance to mutate: It can happen in anyone who is immunosuppressed, such as transplant patients and those undergoing cancer treatments.

By the time the KRISP team identified the second case of a person with H.I.V. producing coronavirus variants, there were more than a dozen reports of the same phenomenon in medical literature from other parts of the world.

Viruses mutate in people with healthy immune systems, too. The difference for people with H.I.V., or another immunosuppressing condition, is that because the virus stays in their systems so much longer, the natural selection process has more time to favor mutations that evade immunity. The typical replication period in a healthy person would be just a couple of weeks, instead of many months; fewer replications mean less opportunities for new mutations.

And because South Africa has so many people with H.I.V., and because this new pandemic has struck hard here, disrupting life in many ways, there is a particular urgency to the work of trying to block the variants.

That is where the efforts of community health workers such as Ms. Mathe come in. On a typical workday, she walks dirt paths past leaking standpipes and front-step hair salons, armed with an ancient cellphone and a mental roster of who has turned up at the clinic lately, who is looking unwell and who needs a visit. Ms. Mathe, who herself has been on H.I.V. treatment for 13 years, is paid \$150 a month.

Silendile Mdunge, a thin 36-year-old mother of three, stopped taking her antiretrovirals during the brutal third wave of Covid that hit South Africa between May and July. Her drugs were no longer being delivered to a nearby community pickup point because many health care workers were redeployed. Instead she was supposed to collect the pills at a central clinic about nine miles away. But she feared contracting this new virus in a shared taxi or standing in the huge clinic lines that she heard about.

She was off the medication for four months before Ms. Mathe turned up at the small home built of scrap wood that Ms. Mdunge shares with seven family members.

“She told me that people who defaulted on their treatment are no longer living, she told me I must think of my children, she said I could die,” said Ms. Mdunge, leaning on the rough door frame in a warm, light rain. Those were things she already knew, in the abstract.

But the persistent presence of Ms. Mathe made the warnings difficult to ignore. With a shrug and an eye roll, Ms. Mdunge suggested that she restarted treatment to end the pestering as much as anything else.

Ms. Mathe listened to this recounting of her methods with a grin. “If you didn’t have love for people, you wouldn’t do this job,” she said

Of the eight million South Africans with H.I.V., 5.2 million are on treatment — but just two-thirds of that group are successfully suppressing the virus with medication. The problem extends beyond South Africa’s borders: 25 million people live with the virus across sub-Saharan Africa, of whom 17 million are virally suppressed with treatment.

The KRISP lab is sequencing coronavirus samples from across Africa, to fill some of the gaps for countries that do not have their own capacity to do so. South Africa’s surveillance network and genomic sequencing are comprehensive enough that its researchers may be first to detect even cases that do not originate in the country.

The great fear is a variant with “immune escape”: the ability to elude Covid vaccines or the immune response elicited by previous infection. As more and more people in South Africa get vaccinated against Covid, there is the potential for a variant to be brewing in the body of a vaccinated person.

“You have a situation where you’ve got the potential to create really nasty variants,” said Dr. Abdool Karim, who has helped lead South Africa’s Covid response. Previous variants emerged when few people had access to vaccination, but now South Africa has delivered the shot to more than a third of its citizens. If vaccinated people with H.I.V. don’t have or don’t take their antiretrovirals, there could be an opportunity for the virus to mutate to evade the vaccine.

“Now, many of these H.I.V. patients have been vaccinated so they have their immune responses. So, if they were to generate a new variant, that variant is going to have to escape those immune responses,” Dr. Abdool Karim said.

	<p>Dr. de Oliveira said he was worried less about a vaccine-resistant variant emerging in South Africa than, for example, a pocket of the United States with untreated H.I.V., low vaccination coverage and a weaker surveillance network than South Africa has.</p> <p>“The chances are we’d find it first,” he said with a grim laugh.</p> <p>The difference with the risk from mutating virus in people with uncontrolled H.I.V., he pointed out, is that it is a problem with a ready solution — getting everyone with the H.I.V. on treatment — whereas a transplant or cancer patient has no options.</p> <p>Above all, the answer to ending the variant threat is to stifle coronavirus transmission. “Vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate the population of Africa,” he said. “My worry is the vaccine nationalism or the hoarding of the vaccine.” People with H.I.V. should be prioritized for vaccine boosters, to maximize the effectiveness of their immune responses, he added.</p> <p>So far, South Africa’s efforts to tackle the variant issue, and be transparent about it, have come at a steep price, in the form of flight bans and global isolation.</p> <p>“As scientists, especially in the kind of forefront, we debate playing down the H.I.V. problem,” Dr. de Oliveira mused in his lab last week. “If we are very vocal, we also risk, again, big discrimination and closing borders and economic measures. But, if you are not very vocal, we have unnecessary deaths.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 DOH: 780,835 cases, 9413 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256326982.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 1,919 new COVID-19 cases and 33 deaths Friday.</p> <p>Statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus are 780,835 and 9,413 deaths.</p> <p>Those numbers are up from 778,916 cases and 9,380 deaths as of Thursday. The case total includes 94,286 infections listed as probable. DOH revises previous case and death counts daily.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Health One alternative Seattle 911 response
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/how-a-health-one-is-setting-up-a-model-for-alternative-911-response-in-seattle/
GIST	<p>If you saw this woman on the bus, you’d picture her as someone’s grandmother, said Seattle firefighter and paramedic Roger Webber.</p> <p>She’s a frequent client of Health One, the city’s mobile response team housed out of the Fire Department. And like many of the team’s clients, the woman is experiencing a combination of poverty, homelessness and behavioral health problems.</p> <p>The team’s mission is to work with people who frequently call 911, as an alternative response to better address their issues by connecting them to resources and social and health services, including primary care providers and shelters.</p> <p>On a recent Monday, Webber, firefighter Heather Reichmann and social worker Donna Andrews found themselves called to meet this woman, in her 70s, at a downtown homeless shelter.</p> <p>She typically calls 911 complaining of breathing issues. Before Health One became involved, the Fire Department would normally take her to the hospital, even though a pulse oximeter would show no issues and she would eventually be discharged and call 911 again.</p>

The night before, she slept on a temporary bed and when the shelter asked her to leave in the morning, she said she had difficulty breathing. This time, the Fire Department called Health One.

The initial plan was to get her to stay at a Starbucks until she could return to the shelter for another night on a temporary bed. But while they were there, Webber said an in-residence bed opened up and she agreed to stay.

Shortly after the Health One team leaves, the shelter calls them again. The woman won't sign the agreement all residents are required to sign, and now she's leaving.

The team believes she has had traumatic experiences with shelters or caseworkers in the past that makes her fearful of anything that feels like a threat to her independence.

The shelter agrees to hold the bed for a few hours as Andrews and Reichmann head back inside to reassure the woman, again, that the shelter won't take any of her money or require her to see a case manager. After nearly 30 more minutes of listening and reassurances, she agrees to stay.

Since its founding in 2019, Health One has grown from one rig to two, with plans for a third. Each vehicle comprises two firefighters and a social worker, who respond to calls on weekdays.

Seattle politicians have held up the program as a successful alternative response system, as they say they are pushing to reenvision and reimagine public safety, following massive protests over racial injustice and policing in Seattle and across the country during summer 2020.

So much so that in July, [Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan announced plans for a "Triage One" team](#), which will send employees who are not sworn police officers, to certain noncriminal or medical 911 calls. The team will be housed initially out of the Fire Department's Mobile Integrated Health Program along with Health One.

The 2022 budget includes \$1.19 million for Triage One, a decrease from \$2.15 million proposed to reflect the late implementation of the program between December 2022 and January 2023.

How does Health One work?

Webber says Health One's unofficial mascot is a sloth. While firefighters work quickly to move on to the next call, Health One takes a different approach, he said. The team tries to spend as much time as needed with each client, to solve the problems that lead them to call 911 repeatedly.

On one occasion, the team spent more than 50 hours over several weeks moving a man into an assisted living facility. They first met him at his home, and discovered he was using a toilet that had long been broken, said Jon Ehrenfeld, who manages Health One and Seattle Fire's Mobile Integrated Health programs.

Health One emphasizes "short-term case management," which can last anywhere from a week to a few months before the case is handed off to another service, like housing case management, a primary care physician or a long-term care facility.

"We build the bridge. We fill the gap until whatever system is supposed to take over, takes over," Webber said.

Filling that gap, however, means team members take on tasks far beyond the job descriptions of paramedics and caseworkers. They have handed out Ensure nutritional drinks, called Ubers for people, fixed wheelchairs, given out prepaid phones and fetched prescriptions.

Around 20% of their clients come directly from 911 dispatchers, who connect them to someone seeking a medical-related welfare check or who may have a minor injury. In order for Health One to respond

directly, the calls must be nonacute and medical in nature. Forty percent of cases are referrals from firefighters made in real time for patients. The remainder are self-dispatched calls when Health One visits established clients or individuals who have previously been referred to them by firefighters or other service providers.

Each Health One team costs approximately \$475,000 annually, with \$100,000 in startup costs, according to Ehrenfeld. One team oversees Pioneer Square; the second one is located in Belltown but also responds to calls in Ballard and the University District. The third unit will oversee the Mount Baker neighborhood. Health One receives around 1,000 to 1,200 referrals every six months, of which the team can usually take on two-thirds.

The most significant chokepoint in the social services network, Ehrenfeld said, is the lack of skilled nursing facilities, shelters, primary care and drug and alcohol treatment centers.

“The single biggest need that our program has is not in the field,” he said. “It’s receiving facilities.”

How will Triage One be different?

In July, Durkan’s office [published a report](#) analyzing the 685,000 dispatch calls the Seattle Police Department responded to between 2017 and 2019, to see which cases could’ve been addressed by an alternative response.

Seattle police agreed there were around 30 types of calls — roughly 12% of total calls and 6% of total officer hours — where an armed police officer did not have to be the primary responder.

Two of these types of calls are welfare checks and “person-down” calls, when people call 911 to report a sleeping or trespassing homeless person, said Chris Lombard, the interim director for the newly created Community Safety and Communications Center, which now handles 911 calls. Triage One, at least initially, will primarily focus on these types of calls, which can be up to 8,000 annually, he said.

In comparison, the busiest fire engines and medic units complete 3,500 to 4,000 runs a year, according to Lombard.

The traditional 911 response system, he said, has functioned in a dichotomy between police and fire. Dispatchers have only 120 seconds to determine which agency is the appropriate response to a call. Triage One will hopefully wedge a third option into that system, he said.

Ideally, first responders will make an assessment within 20 to 90 minutes of their arrival, and then either handle the case themselves or refer it to the Fire Department, police, or possibly Health One.

While Health One has focused heavily on social work, Triage One will focus more on fact-finding and assessing the situation, according to Lombard, who said the team would act as the “eyes and ears,” for dispatchers who have limited insight on a situation.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Vax hesitant workers get jobless benefits
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/so-far-washington-workers-pushed-out-over-vaccine-mandates-arent-losing-jobless-benefits/
GIST	<p>In August, when Gov. Jay Inslee ordered state employees, health care workers and others to get vaccinated against COVID-19 by Oct. 18, officials issued a stern warning: If you quit or get fired for refusing a jab, don’t expect unemployment benefits.</p> <p>But nearly two months after the vaccination deadline, it’s unclear just how much vaccine-hesitant workers have to worry about.</p>

Although thousands of workers in Washington likely have quit or been fired over government and private vaccine mandates — including nearly 2,000 state employees as of Nov. 15, [according to state data](#) — just 26 mandate-related claims for jobless benefits had been flagged for review by the state Employment Security Department as of Friday. Although the review process isn't complete, ESD officials don't believe that any of those claims have been denied.

The number of flagged claims is expected to rise in coming weeks as the ESD's backlogged review process catches up with mandate-related claims, said ESD spokesperson Nick Demerice. And, he added, "there will be many circumstances where if you leave your employer based on this requirement, you will not qualify for benefits."

Some legal experts aren't so sure. They think ESD ultimately may deny benefits only to a relatively small number of workers who quit or are fired over the mandate — in part due to broader uncertainty around rules granting religious and medical exemptions for the vaccine-hesitant.

"Employers and agencies, including ESD, really don't want to wade into the complication of 'what is a sincerely held religious belief?' or 'what is a medical issue?'" said Timothy Emery, managing partner at Emery Reddy, a Seattle-based employment law firm.

Both Emery and Jason Ritterer, an attorney and expert in COVID-related workplace regulations at HKM Employment Attorneys in Seattle, say they have yet to hear of a worker denied benefits over the mandate, despite receiving many inquiries from workers about vaccine mandates.

"What I've seen is that ESD is not challenging unemployment [benefits] in this context at all," Emery said. Uncertainties around vaccine mandates and jobless benefits have been rising since Gov. Jay Inslee issued his vaccination orders in August.

Soon after, amid political uproar over the mandate, an ESD spokesperson warned that while the mandate included medical and religious exemptions, employees who "separate" over the mandate "shouldn't be assuming that they're going to get unemployment insurance." That message was largely affirmed by ESD on Oct. 18, as the state deadline passed.

(A much broader federal vaccine mandate for workers at firms with more than 100 employees was scheduled to go into effect Jan. 4, [but has been suspended pending court challenges](#).)

But from the start, state officials also acknowledged that the benefits question was too nuanced for a single, blanket policy and would require case-by-case review.

Federal and state law gives employers considerable authority to mandate workplace requirements — and to fire workers for not complying — as long as employers also try to accommodate legitimate religious objections or medical concerns.

In theory, that means that quitting or being fired over the vaccine mandates could rule out unemployment benefits, the bulk of which are paid to workers who are laid off.

But unemployment regulations have always allowed potential exceptions: for example, where a worker is fired for anything other than misconduct, or who leaves a verifiably hostile workplace.

COVID-19 has only added more scenarios where workers who quit or were fired might still be eligible for benefits.

A construction company, for example, might grant a religious exemption to a vaccine-opposed worker, but still need to let that employee go because all their worksites require vaccinations.

“We’ve seen many circumstances in which employers have granted an exception or an exemption and then conducted the second-tier analysis that says, ‘but we can’t accommodate you, and therefore, we’re still terminating you,” Rittereiser said.

In such a case, the worker still could be eligible for jobless benefits, Demerice said. Of the 1,956 state employees who had quit or were terminated over the mandate as of Nov. 15, “a good portion of those were folks that were granted an exemption but [were] unable to be accommodated,” Demerice said. “In that situation, you actually likely would receive benefits.”

But vaccine-skeptical workers might retain their benefits eligibility for other reasons — including because their employers are trying to avoid employee lawsuits related to the mandate, legal experts say.

For example, employers might reclassify a termination as a layoff, which is technically covered by unemployment insurance. Or employers might not exercise their right to challenge a terminated employee’s claim for unemployment benefits — challenges that often influence the ESD’s ultimate eligibility decision, legal experts say.

Employers hoping to avoid litigation don’t “want to back the worker into a corner,” Emery said. “If you set up a situation where your worker has no choice but to quit, and then you try to fight their unemployment benefits, you’re begging for a [court] fight.”

More broadly, many employers would rather avoid or defer tough decisions related to controversial policy decisions, and to some degree that may also be the case even for government agencies such as ESD, legal experts said.

ESD “would prefer to not be dealing with ... the nuance of whether or not someone should obtain benefits who’s separated for reasons related to a mandate,” Rittereiser said. “Employers and the Employment Security Department are looking for opportunities to interpret things in a way that avoids coming to a conclusion on the mandate generally.”

“Nobody really wants to test this in the courts,” Emery added.

Another factor that could reduce the number of denied claims: some separated workers may not even bother filing for unemployment benefits, which now cover only about half of lost wages due to the expiration of enhanced federal benefits in September, and max out at \$929 a week.

Still, ESD officials are sticking to their “don’t count on benefits” message. The low number of claims flagged so far as mandate-related likely reflects the fact that most claims arising from quitting or being fired, regardless of reason, are automatically held for review, which can take six to eight weeks, Demerice said.

Given that the state mandate deadline was around seven weeks ago, the ESD expects to see an increase in flagged claims over the next two or three weeks, Demerice said.

“Inevitably some will be denied,” he added. “So it would be irresponsible for us to be putting out a public message that would say you’re likely to get benefits, when there will be a great number of folks that won’t.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Shortage: Christmas tree prices increasing
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/christmas-tree-prices-increase-in-washington-state-due-to-shortage
GIST	Christmas is still weeks away and Andy Smith, who runs Holman Road Trees, has already gotten a gift. “We’re just lucky to get this semi-in today and one in on Sunday because we don’t have enough trees right at this minute,” Smith said.

Smith said the supply chain disruptions have impacted his pocket.

"It cost about \$600 to get a truck from central to Western Washington, the prices have gone up 36 percent and there aren't enough drivers," Smith said.

According to the American Christmas Tree Association, people can expect to pay anywhere from 10 to 30 percent more. Smith said he's had to raise prices.

"Last year, we were selling the tabletops for \$19.95 to \$29.95, this year, there are \$24.95 to \$39.95," said Smith.

That's not the only reason behind the price hike. The organization said it's due to the summer heat wave hurting tree farms in the Pacific North West.

At Seattle Christmas Tree, owner Paris Hebert has been getting ready to for a season of challenges.

"I went, back in September and October, I walked the farms, looked at the damage and I was worried," Hebert said.

Beau Babcock had a backup plan in case he could not get a tree.

"We even discussed the possibility of having a Christmas shrub or bush," Babcock said. "I'm actually surprised."

Smith and Hebert have enough trees to sell, but they say there's no time to waste.

"Get out there," Hebert said. "Get your tree as soon as possible."

The American Christmas Tree Association said it will take for the Christmas tree farms to catch up from the heat wave, so we could see the same problems next year.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Whatcom Co. initial flood damage: \$50M
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/preliminary-flood-damage-estimates-in-whatcom-county-at-least-50m
GIST	<p>WHATCOM COUNTY, Wash. - Following a series of "atmospheric rivers" in November that delivered record-breaking rainfall totals in Whatcom County, officials are continuing to assess flood damages and begin work on recovery.</p> <p>As of Dec. 3, officials say damage to public infrastructure, businesses and private property has been estimated at approximately \$50 million.</p> <p>John Gargett, deputy director of the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office Division of Emergency Management, reported that approximately 1,400 homes and structures countywide reported damage so far.</p> <p>"This is the largest, most impactful natural disaster to hit Whatcom County since its founding in 1854," said Gargett. "This disaster that has no historical comparison and has touched every corner of Whatcom County in addition to the impacts in Skagit County and British Columbia."</p> <p>Renters, homeowners, and those who lost vehicles or other property in the flooding (regardless of whether they have insurance) are asked to use the online damage assessment form or phone (360) 788-5311 as soon as possible.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 King Co. requires small business vax proof
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SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/small-bars-and-restaurants-must-require-proof-of-vax-in-king-county
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Starting Monday, proof of vaccination will be required in small bars and restaurants in King County for any customers 12 and older.</p> <p>In October, King County announced proof of vaccination requirements for bars, restaurants and other businesses.</p> <p>However, smaller restaurants and bars, specifically with capacities of 12 people or fewer, did not have to follow the vaccine proof requirements. The county said the reason was to provide a longer time for these businesses to prepare for the change.</p> <p>"It should be easier for them," said Tommy Pappas. "The public has now learned what is expected when they go out. And if you want to go out and have dinner and get some drinks and stuff, please come on but make sure you got your stuff ready to go," he added.</p> <p>Pappas is the owner of Hotel Albatross in Seattle.</p> <p>His bar started requiring proof of vaccine in August, months before the county's requirements went into place.</p> <p>Pappas says over the last few months, there has been some confusion with the vaccine proof requirements, and even some rude people opposed to the mandates. But at this point, he thinks it should be a smooth transition for smaller businesses adopting the change this upcoming week.</p> <p>These requirements do not apply to outdoor dining, take-out customers, and places that aren't primarily used as indoor dining locations, such as grocery stores.</p> <p>According to the county, proof of a negative COVID test within the last 72 hours is also acceptable.</p> <p>For more information, check out the King County vaccine verification page.</p>
Return to Top	

Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 Ransomware gangs hide plain site: Russia
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/europe/ransomware-russia-bitcoin.html
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — When cybersleuths traced the millions of dollars American companies, hospitals and city governments have paid to online extortionists in ransom money, they made a telling discovery: At least some of it passed through one of the most prestigious business addresses in Moscow.</p> <p>The Biden administration has also zeroed in on the building, Federation Tower East, the tallest skyscraper in the Russian capital. The United States has targeted several companies in the tower as it seeks to penalize Russian ransomware gangs, which encrypt their victims' digital data and then demand payments to unscramble it.</p> <p>Those payments are typically made in cryptocurrencies, virtual currencies like Bitcoin, which the gangs then need to convert to standard currencies, like dollars, euros and rubles.</p> <p>That this high-rise in Moscow's financial district has emerged as an apparent hub of such money laundering has convinced many security experts that the Russian authorities tolerate ransomware operators. The targets are almost exclusively outside Russia, they point out, and in at least one case documented in a U.S. sanctions announcement, the suspect was assisting a Russian espionage agency.</p>

“It says a lot,” said Dmitri Smilyanets, a threat intelligence expert with the Massachusetts-based cybersecurity firm Recorded Future. “Russian law enforcement usually has an answer: ‘There is no case open in Russian jurisdiction. There are no victims. How do you expect us to prosecute these honorable people?’”

Recorded Future has counted about 50 cryptocurrency exchanges in Moscow City, a financial district in the capital, that in its assessment are engaged in illicit activity. Other exchanges in the district are not suspected of accepting cryptocurrencies linked to crime.

Cybercrime is just one of many issues fueling tensions between Russia and the United States, along with the Russian military buildup near Ukraine and a recent migrant crisis on the Belarus-Polish border.

The Treasury Department has estimated that Americans have paid \$1.6 billion in ransoms since 2011. One Russian ransomware strain, Ryuk, made an estimated \$162 million last year encrypting the computer systems of American hospitals during the pandemic and demanding fees to release the data, according to Chainalysis, a company tracking cryptocurrency transactions.

The hospital attacks cast a spotlight on the rapidly expanding criminal industry of ransomware, which is based primarily in Russia. Criminal syndicates have become more efficient, and brazen, in what has become a conveyor-belt-like process of hacking, encrypting and then negotiating for ransom in cryptocurrencies, which can be owned anonymously.

At a summit meeting in June, President Biden pressed President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to crack down on ransomware after a Russian gang, DarkSide, [attacked a major gasoline pipeline on the East Coast, Colonial Pipeline](#), disrupting supplies and creating lines at gas stations.

American officials point to people like Maksim Yakubets, a skinny 34-year-old with a pompadour haircut whom the United States has identified as a kingpin of a major cybercrime operation calling itself Evil Corp. Cybersecurity analysts have linked his group to a series of ransomware attacks, [including one last year](#) targeting the National Rifle Association. [A U.S. sanctions announcement](#) accused Mr. Yakubets of also assisting Russia’s Federal Security Service, the main successor to the K.G.B.

But after the State Department announced a \$5 million bounty for information leading to his arrest, Mr. Yakubets seemed only to flaunt his impunity in Russia: He was photographed driving in Moscow in a Lamborghini partially painted fluorescent yellow.

The cluster of suspected cryptocurrency exchanges in Federation Tower East, first [reported](#) last month by Bloomberg News, further illustrates how the Russian ransomware industry hides in plain sight.

The 97-floor, glass-and-steel high-rise resting on a bend in the Moscow River stands within sight of several government ministries in the financial district, including the Russian [Ministry of Digital Development, Signals and Mass Communications](#).

Two of the Biden administration’s most forceful actions to date targeting ransomware are linked to the tower. In September, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on a cryptocurrency exchange called Suex, which has offices on the 31st floor. It accused the company of laundering \$160 million in illicit funds.

[In an interview](#) at the time, a founder of Suex, Vasily Zhabykin, denied any illegal activity.

And last month, Russian news media outlets reported that Dutch police, using a U.S. extradition warrant, had detained the owner, Denis Dubnikov, of another firm called EggChange, with an office on the 22nd floor. [In a statement](#) issued by one of his companies, Mr. Dubnikov denied any wrongdoing.

Ransomware is attractive to criminals, cybersecurity experts say, because the attacks take place mostly anonymously and online, minimizing the chances of getting caught. It has mushroomed into a sprawling,

highly compartmentalized industry in Russia known to cybersecurity researchers as “ransomware as a service.”

The organizational structure mimics franchises, like McDonald’s or Hertz, that lower barriers to entry, allowing less sophisticated hackers to use established business practices to get into the business. Several high-level gangs develop software and promote fearsome-sounding brands, such as DarkSide or Maze, to intimidate businesses and other organizations that are targets. Other groups that are only loosely related hack into computer systems using the brand and franchised software.

The industry’s growth has been abetted by the rise of cryptocurrencies. That has made old-school money mules, who sometimes had to smuggle cash across borders, practically obsolete.

Laundering the cryptocurrency through exchanges is the final step, and also the most vulnerable, because criminals must exit the anonymous online world to appear at a physical location, where they trade Bitcoin for cash or deposit it in a bank.

The exchange offices are “the end of the Bitcoin and ransomware rainbow,” said Gurvais Grigg, a former F.B.I. agent who is a researcher with Chainalysis, the cryptocurrency tracking company.

The computer codes in virtual currencies allow transactions to be tracked from one user to another, even if the owners’ identities are anonymous, until the cryptocurrency reaches an exchange. There, in theory, records should link the cryptocurrency with a real person or company.

“They are really one of the key points in the whole ransomware strain,” Mr. Grigg said of the exchange offices. Ransomware gangs, he said, “want to make money. And until you cash it out, and you get it through an exchange at a cash-out point, you cannot spend it.”

It is at this point, cybersecurity experts say, that criminals should be identified and apprehended. But the Russian government has allowed the exchanges to flourish, saying that it only investigates cybercrime if Russian laws are violated. Regulations are a gray area in Russia, as elsewhere, in the nascent industry of cryptocurrency trading.

Russian cryptocurrency traders say the United States is imposing an unfair burden of due diligence on their companies, given the quickly evolving nature of regulations.

“The people who are real criminals, who create ransomware, and the people working in Moscow City are completely different people,” Sergei Mendeleyev, a founder of one trader based in Federation Tower East, Garantex, said in an interview. The Russian crypto exchanges, he said, were blamed for crimes they are unaware of.

Mr. Mendeleyev, who no longer works at the company, said American cryptocurrency tracking services provide data to non-Russian exchanges to help them avoid illicit transactions but have refused to work with Russian traders — in part because they suspect the traders might use the information to tip off criminals. That complicates the Russian companies’ efforts to root out illegal activity.

He conceded that not all Russian exchanges tried very hard. Some based in Moscow’s financial district were little more than an office, a safe full of cash and a computer, he said.

At least 15 cryptocurrency exchanges are based in Federation Tower East, according to a list of businesses in the building compiled by Yandex, a Russian mapping service.

In addition to Suex and EggChange, the companies targeted by the Biden administration, cyberresearchers and an international cryptocurrency exchange company have flagged two other building tenants that they suspect of illegal activity involving Bitcoin.

The building manager, Aeon Corp., did not respond to inquiries about the exchanges in its offices.

	<p>Like the banks and insurance companies they share space with, those firms are likely to have chosen the site for its status and its stringent building security, said Mr. Smilyanets, the researcher at Recorded Future.</p> <p>“The Moscow City skyscrapers are very fancy,” he said. “They can post on Instagram with these beautiful sights, beautiful skyscrapers. It boosts their legitimacy.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 Threat actor behind malicious Tor relays
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/a-mysterious-threat-actor-is-running-hundreds-of-malicious-tor-relays/
GIST	<p>Since at least 2017, a mysterious threat actor has run thousands of malicious servers in entry, middle, and exit positions of the Tor network in what a security researcher has described as an attempt to deanonymize Tor users.</p> <p>Tracked as KAX17, the threat actor ran at its peak more than 900 malicious servers part of the Tor network, which typically tends to hover around a daily total of up to 9,000-10,000.</p> <p>Some of these servers work as entry points (guards), others as middle relays, and others as exit points from the Tor network.</p> <p>Their role is to encrypt and anonymize user traffic as it enters and leaves the Tor network, creating a giant mesh of proxy servers that bounce connections between each other and provide the much-needed privacy that Tor users come for.</p> <p>Servers added to the Tor network typically must have contact information included in their setup, such as an email address, so Tor network administrators and law enforcement can contact server operators in the case of a misconfiguration or file an abuse report.</p> <p>However, despite this rule, servers with no contact information are often added to the Tor network, which is not strictly policed, mainly to ensure there’s always a sufficiently large number of nodes to bounce and hide user traffic.</p> <p>KAX17: Non-amateur level and persistent group</p> <p>But a security researcher and Tor node operator going by Nusenu told <i>The Record</i> this week that it observed a pattern in some of these Tor relays with no contact information, which he first noticed in 2019 and has eventually traced back as far as 2017.</p> <p>Grouping these servers under the KAX17 umbrella, Nusenu says this threat actor has constantly added servers with no contact details to the Tor network in industrial quantities, operating servers in the realm of hundreds at any given point.</p> <p>The actor’s servers are typically located in data centers spread all over the world and are typically configured as entry and middle points primarily, although KAX17 also operates a small number of exit points.</p> <p>Nusenu said this is strange as most threat actors operating malicious Tor relays tend to focus on running exit points, which allows them to modify the user’s traffic. For example, a threat actor that Nusenu has been tracking as BTCMITM20 ran thousands of malicious Tor exit nodes in order to replace Bitcoin wallet addresses inside web traffic and hijack user payments.</p> <p>KAX17’s focus on Tor entry and middle relays led Nusenu to believe that the group, which he described as “non-amateur level and persistent,” is trying to collect information on users connecting to the Tor network and attempting to map their routes inside it.</p>

In research published this week and shared with *The Record*, Nusenu said that at one point, there was a 16% chance that a Tor user would connect to the Tor network through one of KAX17's servers, a 35% chance they would pass through one of its middle relays, and up to 5% chance to exit through one.

"High probability of relays and guards can definitely be used to identify hidden services. It can also be used to decoak users — especially if you have some other means to tracking middle relay past the guard, such as monitoring common public services," [Dr. Neal Krawetz](#), an independent researcher studying the Tor network, told *The Record* in a conversation this week.

Nusenu told *The Record* he's been reporting KAX17's servers to the Tor Project since last year, with the Tor security team removing all of KAX17's exit relays in October 2020.

Another batch of Tor exit relays with no contact info came online immediately after the October 2020 removals, but Nusenu said he hasn't been able to link these new servers to KAX17 just yet, even if it is very likely that they are.

Hundreds of KAX17 Tor servers removed this year as well

Contacted for comment, a spokesperson for the Tor Project confirmed [Nusenu's latest findings](#) and said they also removed a batch of KAX17 malicious relays this year as well, in [October](#), and a second batch in [November](#).

"Once we got contacted, we looked through all the relays in the network and identified several hundred relays that are very likely belonging to the same group and removed them on November 8," a spokesperson told *The Record*.

This is not academic research

As for who is behind this group, neither Nusenu nor the Tor Project wanted to speculate.

"We are still investigating this attacker and can't provide links to any attribution so far," a Tor Project spokesperson told us in an email earlier yesterday.

However, Nusenu says that KAX17 made at least one operational security (OpSec) mistake in its early years when some of its servers did feature an email address.

Ironically, the threat actor reused the same email to sign up for the Tor Project mailing list and then participate in discussions and advocate against the removal of their malicious servers.

While all signs point to a nation-level and well-resourced threat actor who can afford to rent hundreds of high-bandwidth servers across the globe for no financial return, *The Record* did ask Nusenu about the possibility of KAX17 being an academic project studying [Sybil attacks](#), a technique known to be able to deanonymize Tor traffic under certain conditions. The researcher replied that this was unlikely and provided the following arguments why (edited for grammar):

- Academic research is usually limited in time. KAX17 has been active since 2017.
- Researchers do not get involved in weakening anti-bad-relays policies on the Tor mailing list.
- Researchers do not fight against their removal and do not replace removed relays with new relays.
- Research-based relays usually run within 1-2 autonomous systems, not >50 ASes.
- Research relays usually run <100 relays, not >500.
- Research relays usually do have a relay ContactInfo.
- The Tor Project is quite well connected to the research community.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Germany warns: cyberattacks over holidays
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/germany-warns-of-ransomware-attacks-over-christmas-citing-emotet-return-unpatched-exchange-servers/

GIST	<p>The German cybersecurity authority has told German organizations to expect ransomware and other cyber-attacks over the Christmas and end-of-year holidays, citing the return of the Emotet botnet and the large number of Microsoft Exchange email servers that have been left unpatched.</p> <p>The Emotet gang, which began rebuilding its botnet two weeks ago, has often rented access to infected systems to ransomware gangs to serve as springboards for attacks.</p> <p>Numerous vulnerabilities discovered in Microsoft Exchange email servers this year have been abused throughout 2021 to allow ransomware gangs—such as DearCry, BlackKingdom, Babuk, and BlackByte—to enter corporate networks and encrypt internal servers.</p> <p>Hackers prefer major holidays for attacks</p> <p>“Holidays, vacation times and weekends in particular have been used repeatedly for such attacks in the past, as many companies and organizations are less responsive then,” BSI President, Arne Schönbohm, said on Thursday, urging companies to patch systems and take steps to block Emotet spam.</p> <p>The BSI warning comes on the heels of a similar alert sent by US CISA last week, ahead of the Thanksgiving weekend.</p> <p>Attacks over major holidays have become commonplace in recent years, as criminal gangs have realized that IT and security teams are typically off duty or working in reduced capacities.</p> <p>For example, hackers began exploiting a zero-day in the Accellion file-sharing server just ahead of the 2020 Christmas holiday. Even if the vendor released a patch, most companies didn’t get to install it until the next year, as IT teams were off or delayed installing it to have more time to test and review the code.</p> <p>Three-quarters of Exchange servers still unpatched</p> <p>Things are particularly bad this year in terms of the possibility of a major ransomware outbreak due to the high number of critical Exchange vulnerabilities disclosed in 2021, such as ProxyShell, ProxyLogon, ProxyOracle, and so on.</p> <p>Numbers crunched by security firm Rapid7 in October showed that out of 306,552 Exchange servers connected to the internet, 222,145 (72.4%) were vulnerable to at least one major vulnerability.</p> <p>Germany is particularly impacted by Exchange vulnerabilities due to the large number of servers deployed inside government agencies and the private sector, second only to the US in terms of Exchange servers, per security firm ESET.</p> <p>With ransomware gangs leveraging Exchange servers as entry points being spotted as recently as last week, the chances are that some groups will take advantage of the upcoming winter holidays to leave some unwanted gifts under the trees of German companies.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 Crooks selling access to hacked networks
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/theres-been-a-big-jump-in-crooks-selling-access-to-hacked-networks-ransomware-gangs-are-their-best-customers/
GIST	<p>There's been a surge in cyber criminals selling access to compromised corporate networks as hackers look to cash in on the demand for vulnerable networks from gangs looking to initiate ransomware attacks.</p> <p>Researchers at cybersecurity company Group-IB analysed activity on underground forums and said there's been a sharp increase in the number of offers to sell access to compromised corporate networks, with the number of posts offering access tripling between 2020 and 2021.</p>

Crooks are claiming to offer access to compromised [Virtual Private Network](#) (VPN) and [Remote Desktop Protocol](#) (RDP) login credentials, as well as web shells, reverse shells, [Cobalt Strike penetration testing tools](#) and more.

With this access, cyber criminals can access a company's networks and attempt to gain access to usernames and passwords or administrator rights that allow them to gain further control over the network.

On the underground forums being analysed, the number of offers to sell access to corporate networks went up from 362 to 1,099, a rise of three times in just a year and the report warns that increase is "one of the clearest trends on underground forums".

Some of the most common industries to which access is being offered to include manufacturing, education, financial services and healthcare.

The cost of access varies greatly and can sometimes be offered for a few thousand dollars – [something a ransomware crew could make back many times over from a successful attack](#). But there's a direct correlation between access value and the victim's company revenue – the higher the revenue, the higher the price.

One of the key reasons there's been an increase in sellers is because there's the demand that is being driven by [the growth in ransomware attacks](#). Ransomware groups need access to networks and [buying access](#) is easier and less time consuming than compromising networks themselves.

"Ransomware operators are the main "customers" of initial access brokers' (IAB) services," Dmitry Shestakov, head of cybercrime research at Group-IB told ZDNet.

"This unholy alliance of IABs and ransomware operators as part of ransomware-as-a-service affiliate programs has led to the rise of the ransomware empire," he added.

Another reason for the growth of initial access markets is because there is a relatively low skills threshold for engaging in this sort of cybercrime. These less sophisticated cyber criminals can use [phishing attacks](#) or buy off-the-shelf [malware](#) to steal information.

The report also suggests that gaining this initial access has got easier due to the rise in remote working as a result of [the pandemic](#), which has resulted in many organisations [unintentionally using insecure or misconfigured applications](#) that cyber criminals can easily exploit.

And as long as there are insecure networks that can be accessed and a demand from other cyber criminals to buy access to those networks, the rise of the access broker market looks set to continue.

"We expect the number of brokers and initial access offers to grow. As the supply increases to meet the demand, we expect the price of initial access to corporate networks to decrease," said Shestakov.

"Ransomware will remain the main way to monetize access to corporate networks because it provides the highest possible return on investment for IABs," he added.

There are measures that organisations can take to help avoid cyber criminals breaching the network and gaining access to credentials.

They include [installing software updates and security patches on a regular and timely basis](#) to protect against known vulnerabilities, encouraging the use of [strong passwords](#) that are difficult to breach in brute-force attacks and applying [multi-factor authentication](#) to accounts, so that if credentials are compromised, there's limited opportunities for attackers to exploit them.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 Cross-site leak attacks on web browsers
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/14-new-xs-leaks-cross-site-leaks.html

GIST	<p>Researchers have discovered 14 new types of cross-site data leakage attacks against a number of modern web browsers, including Tor Browser, Mozilla Firefox, Google Chrome, Microsoft Edge, Apple Safari, and Opera, among others.</p> <p>Collectively known as "XS-Leaks," the browser bugs enable a malicious website to harvest personal data from its visitors as they interact with other websites in the background without the targets' knowledge. The findings are the result of a comprehensive study of cross-site attacks undertaken by a group of academics from Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB) and Niederrhein University.</p> <p>"XS-Leaks bypass the so-called same-origin policy, one of a browser's main defences against various types of attacks," the researchers said in a statement. "The purpose of the same-origin policy is to prevent information from being stolen from a trusted website. In the case of XS-Leaks, attackers can nevertheless recognize individual, small details of a website. If these details are tied to personal data, those data can be leaked."</p> <p>Stemming from side-channels built into the web platform that permits an attacker to gather this data from a cross-origin HTTP resource, the cross-site bugs impact an array of popular browsers such as Tor, Chrome, Edge, Opera, Safari Firefox, Samsung Internet, spanning across different operating systems Windows, macOS, Android, and iOS.</p> <p>The new class of vulnerabilities is also different from a cross-site request forgery (CSRF) attack in that unlike the latter, which exploits a web application's trust in a browser client to execute unintended actions on behalf of the user, they can be weaponized to infer information about a user.</p> <p>"They are a significant threat to Internet privacy since simply visiting a web page may reveal if the victim is a drug addict or leak a sexual orientation," the researchers explained. "XS-Leaks take advantage of small pieces of information which are exposed during interactions between websites [...] to reveal sensitive information about users, such as their data in other web applications, details about their local environment, or internal networks they are connected to."</p> <p>The core idea is that while websites are not allowed to directly access data (i.e., read server responses) on other websites because of same-origin constraints, a rogue online portal can attempt to load a specific resource or an API endpoint from a website, say, an online banking website, on the user's browser and draw inferences about the victim's transaction history. Alternatively, the source of the leak could be timing-based side-channels or speculative execution attacks like Meltdown and Spectre.</p> <p>As mitigations, the researchers recommend denying all event handler messages, minimizing error message occurrences, applying global limit restrictions, and creating a new history property when redirection occurs. At the end-user side, turning on first-party isolation as well as Enhanced Tracking Prevention in Firefox have been found to decrease the applicability of XS-Leaks. Intelligent Tracking Prevention in Safari, which blocks third-party cookies by default, also prevents all leaks that are not based on a pop-up.</p> <p>"The root cause of most XS-Leaks is inherent to the design of the web," the researchers said. "Oftentimes applications are vulnerable to some cross-site information leaks without having done anything wrong. It is challenging to fix the root cause of XS-Leaks at the browser level because in many cases doing so would break existing websites."</p> <p>Return to Top</p>
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HEADLINE	12/03 Hackers: incident response chat rooms
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/breach/ragnar-locker-reminds-breach-victims-it-can-read-the-on-network-incident-response-chat-rooms
GIST	On Thursday, the Ragnar Locker ransomware group published the first batch of files stolen from a French computer and electric goods store it had victimized. Along with the archives were a series of screenshots taken while on the victim's network, including one from inside an incident response chat.

Ragnar Locker had been monitoring their victims as they discussed how to respond.

It is common for security teams to forget that chats and email accounts that live on breached networks will no longer be secure, a variety of breach responders, negotiators, and preparation consultants told SC Media.

"What I've found is that a lot of times in playbooks communications are addressed mostly as from a standpoint of when to address whom within the organization or externally. It's not as much about the integrity of those communications," said Trevin Edgeworth, director of Bishop Fox's red team practice.

There is an easy fix: during crisis planning, prepare out-of-band communications, anything from dedicated crisis consumer email accounts to secure chat apps.

Forgetting that, they say, has made many breaches worse.

"We've seen before where the attacker intercepted an Excel spreadsheet with the containment and eradication strategy," said David Wong, vice president of Mandiant Consulting. "So after we said that on Saturday at midnight, we're gonna reset those accounts, we're gonna block their IPs, we're gonna shut down the systems, Friday night, right before we're about to do what we're gonna do, they create backdoors elsewhere in their network from different infrastructure."

It is not just a matter of making breaches more persistent. During ransomware attacks, ransomware actors can catch victims discussing bringing in [negotiators or police against the demands of a ransom note](#), or overhear strategic discussions of pricing. "You don't want them to hear you say, 'We can afford \$10 million. We think we can get them down to \$2 million if we offer them \$500,000,'" said Wong.

Setting up out-of-band communications in advance is key to having them available in an emergency. Setting up a new communications system adds another wrinkle to the chaos around a breach, especially since you cannot use communications systems that may have been breached to coordinate moving to that new system.

Personal email accounts may not be a reasonable option for out-of-band contact. While the actors behind a breach might not have access to them, if someone sues the company over a breach, those accounts may be open to a subpoena, noted Wong.

In the end, communications is one of a number of oft-overlooked services an enterprise may rely on to handle a breach that could be disrupted during a breach.

"What companies don't realize is how short a path it is from domain compromise to doing other damage," said Edgeworth. "Gaining complete control of a domain is to having access to the most sensitive areas of your organization, be that your messaging and communications, or your customer data repositories, or your data backups. It's all coming off of that domain compromised."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Fraudsters Omicron phishing campaign
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/omicron-phishing-campaign-hits/
GIST	<p>Online fraudsters have reacted quickly to news of a potentially new severe COVID-19 variant, with a carefully crafted phishing email campaign, according to observers.</p> <p>Consumer rights group Which? spotted the email, which is designed to appear as if sent from the NHS, and urges recipients to get a new PCR test for the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Two separate versions of the same email feature a link and a legitimate-looking "get it now" button.</p>

	<p>“The fake email was also sent to a Which? member from ‘NHS Customer Service’ using the email address ‘contact-nhs[AT]nhscontact.com.’ This email address may seem authentic, but it has nothing to do with the genuine NHS,” Which? explained.</p> <p>“As well as falsely claiming that the new COVID variant requires new test kits, the email invites readers to visit the site shown in the above image. But clicking the link takes you to the true web address – ‘health-service-nh.com’ — which is a copycat of the NHS website set up just days ago.”</p> <p>The phishing site then asks users to enter their full name, date of birth, address, mobile number, and email address, as well as their mother’s maiden name – which scammers could use to craft follow-on identity fraud attacks.</p> <p>It also asks for a small payment of £1.24 for ‘delivery’ – presumably, if users proceed with this they will also have their bank card details stolen.</p> <p>Which? reported the scam to the National Cyber Security Centre’s Suspicious Email Reporting Service, which has been incredibly popular during the pandemic.</p> <p>According to the NCSC, it accrued 5.9 million reports over the past year, leading to the removal of more than 53,000 scams and 96,500 malicious URLs.</p> <p>At the height of the first wave of the pandemic, in April 2020, Google claimed to be blocking over 240 million COVID-themed spam messages each day and 18 million malware and phishing emails.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Malvertising; malicious Chrome extensions
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/malvertising-malicious-chrome-extensions-backdoors/
GIST	<p>Cisco Talos researchers have identified malvertising campaigns using fake installers of popular games and applications, such as WeChat, Viber, Battlefield, and NoxPlayer, to lure users into downloading an undocumented, malicious Google Chrome extension and a backdoor.</p> <p>The objective is to steal data and credentials from the compromised system and maintain remote access. Cisco Talos researchers named this campaign Magnat because the malware payloads are tied to an unidentified actor using the alias Magnat.</p> <p>About the Attack</p> <p>Researchers believe that the campaign has been active since 2018, and since then, the malware has been under development constantly. The attacks distribute two forms of undocumented custom-made malware.</p> <p>According to researchers, victims are lured through malvertising, which involves malicious online ads, to download fake installers onto their systems. These installers do not install the advertised software but three forms of malware, including a password stealer, a malicious browser extension, and a backdoor.</p> <p>These enable keylogging and capture screenshots of whatever is displayed on the user’s screen. The first activity observed by the researchers was by the end of 2019, and they kept noticing it during early 2020 while fresh instances were observed from April 2021.</p> <p>Redline Password Stealer and MagnatExtension</p> <p>In the Magnat campaign, the actors use a password stealer called Redline. This is a common malware known for stealing all the usernames and passwords stored in the infected device.</p> <p>Researchers noted that Magnat previously used Azorult password stealer and then switched to Redline after Azorult stopped functioning correctly after Chrome 80’s release in Feb 2020.</p>

It is worth noting that [in October 2021](#) and as recently as [November 29th](#), both Redline and Azorult malware were seen in campaigns targeting YouTubers with cooker stealer attacks and abusing legitimate remote access tools to steal cryptocurrency.

As for the Magnat attack; apart from Redline Stealer, threat actors also distribute malicious Chrome extensions called MagnatExtension programmed to capture screenshots and record keystrokes. It also masquerades as Google's Safe Browsing and comes with various features such as stealing form data, harvesting cookies and executing arbitrary JavaScript code.

The extension uses a hardcoded C2 address, which is quite interesting as it can be updated with a list of additional C2 domains, and if it fails, the C2 falls back to an alternative method of obtaining a new C2 address after performing a Twitter search for hashtags like "#ololo2019 and #aquamamba2019."

An AutoIt-based backdoor is also used to establish remote access to the device. Users in the USA, Canada, Australia, Spain, Italy, and Norway are the prime targets of Magnat.

"Based on the use of password stealers and a Chrome extension that is similar to a banking trojan, we assess that the attacker's goals are to obtain user credentials, possibly for sale or for his own use in further exploitation," Tiago Pereira of Cisco Talos stated in his [blog post](#).

"The motive for the deployment of an RDP backdoor is unclear. The most likely are the sale of RDP access, the use of RDP to work around online service security features based on IP address or other endpoint installed tools, or the use of RDP for further exploitation on systems that appear interesting to the attacker," Pereira noted.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 BitMart Exchange hacked; \$150M stolen
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/bitmart-exchange-hacked-hackers-steal-millions/
GIST	<p>BitMart Exchange, a cryptocurrency trading platform has suffered a "large-scale" security breach in which hackers have stolen funds worth \$150 million, the company said today on Twitter.</p> <p>With this breach, BitMart has added its name to the list of the latest victim of security breaches aimed at cryptocurrency exchanges and DeFi projects. On December 2nd, BadgerDAO lost \$120 million to hackers, while on November 27th, MonoX lost \$31 million after hackers exploited a bug in smart contracts.</p> <p>As for Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands-based BitMart exchange, the company acknowledged the breach in a blog post revealing that although it is unclear how hackers managed to breach its security, it can be confirmed that they stole over \$150 million worth of funds.</p> <p>BitMart is still investigating the incident however limited details shared by the exchange confirmed that the breach involves one of its ETH hot wallets and one of BSC hot wallets.</p> <p>In its security update, the BitMart exchange explained that, <i>The affected ETH hot wallet and BSC hot wallet carry a small percentage of assets on BitMart and all of our other wallets are secure and unharmed.</i></p> <p>At the time of writing, all withdrawals were suspended until further notice.</p> <p>Founded in 2018; BitMart has over 5.5 million registered users, and with billions of dollars in daily trading volume the exchange is considered to be one of the top 10 exchanges in the world.</p> <p>This article will be updated once BitMart Exchange shares additional details. For now, BitMart customers should remain alert and watch out for phishing emails that may hit their inbox mimicking security updates from the company and ask for your personal or financial details.</p>

HEADLINE	12/05 Phishing uses fake Office 365 spam alerts
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/convincing-microsoft-phishing-uses-fake-office-365-spam-alerts/
GIST	<p>A persuasive and ongoing series of phishing attacks are using fake Office 365 notifications asking the recipients to review blocked spam messages, with the end goal of stealing their Microsoft credentials.</p> <p>What makes these phishing emails especially convincing is the use of quarantine[at]messaging.microsoft.com to send them to potential targets and the display name matching the recipients' domains.</p> <p>Additionally, the attackers have embedded the official Office 365 logo and included links to Microsoft's privacy statement and acceptable use policy at the end of the email.</p> <p>Luckily, the phishing messages come with text formatting issues and out-of-place extra spaces that would allow spotting these emails' malicious nature on closer inspection.</p> <p>"The email subject is 'Spam Notification: 1 New Messages,' alluding to the body of the email that informs the recipient that a spam message has been blocked and is being held in quarantine for them to review," cloud email security provider MailGuard who spotted this campaign said.</p> <p>"Details of the 'Prevented spam message' are provided, with scammers personalizing the subject heading as '[company domain] Adjustment: Transaction Expenses Q3 UPDATE' to create a sense of urgency and using a finance-related message."</p> <p>The targets are given 30 days to review the quarantined messages by going to Microsoft's Security and Compliance Center by clicking on an embedded link.</p> <p>However, instead of reaching the Office 365 portal when clicking the 'Review' button, they are sent to a phishing landing page that will ask them to enter their Microsoft credentials to access the quarantined spam messages.</p> <p>After entering their credentials in the malicious form displayed on the phishing page, their accounts' details get sent to attacker-controlled servers.</p> <p>If they fall victim to these tricks, the victims' Microsoft credentials will later be used by the cybercriminals to take control of their accounts and gain access to all their information.</p> <p>"Providing your Microsoft account details to cybercriminals means that they have unauthorised access to your sensitive data, such as contact information, calendars, email communications, and more," MailGuard added.</p> <p>Appealing target for phishing attacks</p> <p>Office 365 users are continuously targeted in phishing campaigns attempting to harvest their credentials and use them in fraudulent schemes.</p> <p>Microsoft revealed in August that a highly evasive spear-phishing campaign targeted Office 365 customers in multiple waves of attacks beginning with July 2020.</p> <p>In March, the company also warned of a phishing operation that stole roughly 400,000 OWA and Office 365 credentials since December 2020 and later expanded to abuse new legitimate services to circumvent secure email gateways (SEGs) protections.</p>

	<p>In late January, Redmond further notified Microsoft Defender ATP subscribers of an increasing number of OAuth phishing (consent phishing) attacks targeting remote workers.</p> <p>If successful, the impact of phishing attacks ranges from identity theft and fraud schemes including but not limited to Business Email Compromise (BEC) attacks.</p> <p>For instance, since last year, the FBI has warned of BEC scammers abusing popular cloud email services, including Microsoft Office 365 and Google G Suite, in Private Industry Notifications issued in March and April 2020.</p> <p>The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has also revealed that the number of identity theft reports doubled last year compared to 2019, reaching a record of 1.4 million reports within a single year.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 Fake support agents call SMS victims
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fake-support-agents-call-victims-to-install-android-banking-malware/
GIST	<p>The BRATA Android remote access trojan (RAT) has been spotted in Italy, with threat actors calling victims of SMS attacks to steal their online banking credentials.</p> <p>The variant currently in circulation is new, and according to a report by researchers at Cleafy, it can pass undetected by the vast majority of AV scanners.</p> <p>BRATA was previously seen in Brazil, delivered via apps on the Google Play Store, but it appears that its authors are now selling it to foreign operators, which is not unusual in this field.</p> <p>Using fake anti-spam apps</p> <p>The Italian campaign was first spotted in June 2021, delivering multiple Android apps through SMS phishing, otherwise known as smishing.</p> <p>Most of the malicious apps were called “Sicurezza Dispositivo” (Device Security) and were promoted as anti-spam tools.</p> <p>That first wave failed in AV detection, having a 50% stealthiness rate in Virus Total. These high detection rates led to a second wave using a new variant with extremely low detection rates in mid-October.</p> <p>In the second wave, the actors also expanded their targeting scope, raising the targeted financial institutes from one to three.</p> <p>Manual labor required</p> <p>The attack begins with an unsolicited SMS text linking a malicious website. This text claims to be a message from the bank urging the recipient to download an anti-spam app.</p> <p>The link leads to a page from where the victim downloads the BRATA malware themselves or takes them to a phishing page to enter their banking credentials.</p> <p>During that step, the threat actors call the victim on the phone and pretend to be an employee of the bank, offering help with installing the app.</p> <p>BRATA campaign in Italy</p> <p>The app requires multiple permissions to enable the actor to take full control of the compromised device, including the Accessibility services, view and send SMS, make phone calls, and perform screen recording.</p> <p>The full list of BRATA’s capabilities includes:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercept SMS messages and forward them to a C2 server. This feature is used to get 2FA sent by the bank via SMS during the login phase or to confirm money transactions. • Screen recording and casting capabilities that allow the malware to capture any sensitive information displayed on the screen. This includes audio, passwords, payment information, photo, and messages. Through the Accessibility Service, the malware clicks the “start now” button (of the popup) automatically, so the victim is not able to deny the recording/casting of the owned device. • Remove itself from the compromised device to reduce detection. • Uninstall specific applications (e.g., antivirus). • Hide its own icon app to be less traceable by not advanced users. • Disable Google Play Protect to avoid being flagged by Google as suspicious app. • Modify the device settings to get more privileges. • Unlock the device if it is locked with a secret pin or pattern. • Display the phishing page. • Abuse the accessibility service to read everything that is shown on the screen of the infected device or to simulate clicks (taps) on the screen. This information is then sent to the C2 server of the attackers. <p>The actors abuse these permissions to access the victim’s bank account, retrieve the 2FA code, and eventually perform fraudulent transactions.</p> <p>The mule accounts used as intermediary points in this campaign are based in Italy, Lithuania, and the Netherlands.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 Black Friday shoppers: 1/3rd fake, bots
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/endpoint/one-third-of-black-friday-shoppers-were-bots-fake-users
GIST	<p>Bots and fake users made up 35.7% of all online shoppers this Black Friday, cybersecurity firm Cheq revealed in new data.</p> <p>Cheq's insight comes from a survey conducted across 42,000 websites in North America, Europe, and Asia. Forms of fake traffic observed included malicious scrapers and crawlers, sophisticated botnets, fake accounts, click farms, and proxy users, as well as illegitimate users committing e-commerce-related fraud.</p> <p>E-commerce websites were found to be particularly vulnerable during this year's kickoff to the holiday shopping season, the data shows. These sites had high exposure to carding attacks, data breaches, chargeback fraud, fake sign-ups, and other disruptive activity, researchers report.</p>
Return to Top	Read the full release for more details.

HEADLINE	12/03 Pakistan hackers hit India, Afghan govts.
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/researchers-detail-how-pakistani.html?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>A Pakistani threat actor successfully socially engineered a number of ministries in Afghanistan and a shared government computer in India to steal sensitive Google, Twitter, and Facebook credentials from its targets and stealthily obtain access to government portals.</p> <p>Malwarebytes' latest findings go into detail about the new tactics and tools adopted by the APT group known as SideCopy, which is so-called because of its attempts to mimic the infection chains associated with another group tracked as SideWinder and mislead attribution.</p> <p>"The lures used by SideCopy APT are usually archive files that have embedded one of these files: LNK, Microsoft Publisher or Trojanized Applications," Malwarebytes researcher Hossein Jazi said, adding the embedded files are tailored to target government and military officials based in Afghanistan and India.</p>

The revelation comes close on the heels of [disclosures](#) that Meta took steps to block malicious activities carried out by the group on its platform by using romantic lures to compromise individuals with ties to the Afghan government, military, and law enforcement in Kabul.

Some of the prominent attacks were waged against personnel associated with the Administration Office of the President (AOP) of Afghanistan as well as the Ministry of Foreign affairs, Ministry of Finance, and the National Procurement Authority, resulting in the theft of social media passwords and password-protected documents. SideCopy also broke into a shared computer in India and harvested credentials from government and education services.

In addition, the actor is said to have siphoned several Microsoft Office documents, including names, numbers, and email addresses of officials and databases containing information related to identity cards, diplomatic visas, and asset registrations from the Afghani government websites, all of which are expected to be used as future decoys or to fuel further attacks against the individuals themselves.

The cyber espionage campaign observed by Malwarebytes involves the target opening the lure document, leading to the execution of a loader that's used to drop a next-stage remote access trojan called ActionRAT, which is capable of uploading files, executing commands received from a server, and even download more payloads.

Also dropped by the loader is a new information stealer dubbed AuTo Stealer, which is programmed to collect Microsoft Office files, PDF documents, text files, database files, and images before exfiltrating the information to its server over HTTP or TCP.

This is far from the first time SideCopy APT's tactics have come to light. In September 2020, cybersecurity firm Quick Heal [revealed](#) specifics about an espionage attack aimed at Indian defense units and armed forces personnel at least since 2019 with an aim to steal sensitive information.

Then earlier this July, Cisco Talos researchers [exposed](#) the hacking group's myriad infection chains delivering bespoke and commodity remote access trojans such as CetaRAT, Allakore, and njRAT in what they called an expansion of malware campaigns targeting entities in India.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 FBI: Cuba ransomware group
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/fbi-cuba-ransomware-hit-49-critical-infrastructure-organizations/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The FBI has released a new notice about the Cuba ransomware, explaining that the group has attacked "49 entities in five critical infrastructure sectors" and made at least \$43.9 million in ransom payments.</p> <p>In a notice sent out on Friday, the FBI said the group is targeting enterprises in the financial, government, healthcare, manufacturing, and information technology sectors while using the Hancitor malware to gain entry to Windows systems.</p> <p>"Cuba ransomware is distributed through Hancitor malware, a loader known for dropping or executing stealers, such as Remote Access Trojans (RATs) and other types of ransomware, onto victims' networks," the notice explained, noting that the encrypted files have the ".cuba" extension.</p> <p>"Hancitor malware actors use phishing emails, Microsoft Exchange vulnerabilities, compromised credentials, or legitimate Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP) tools to gain initial access to a victim's network. Subsequently, Cuba ransomware actors use legitimate Windows services -- such as PowerShell, PsExec, and other unspecified services -- and then leverage Windows Admin privileges to execute their ransomware and other processes remotely."</p> <p>The eye-popping ransom payments were dwarfed by the amount of money the group has demanded from victims, which the FBI pegged at \$74 million.</p>

Once a victim is compromised, the ransomware installs and executes a CobaltStrike beacon while two executable files are downloaded. The two files allow attackers to acquire passwords and "write to the compromised system's temporary (TMP) file."

"Once the TMP file is uploaded, the 'krots.exe' file is deleted and the TMP file is executed in the compromised network. The TMP file includes Application Programming Interface (API) calls related to memory injection that, once executed, deletes itself from the system. Upon deletion of the TMP file, the compromised network begins communicating with a reported malware repository located at Montenegro-based Uniform Resource Locator (URL) teoresp.com," the FBI explained.

"Further, Cuba ransomware actors use MimiKatz malware to steal credentials, and then use RDP to log into the compromised network host with a specific user account. Once an RDP connection is complete, the Cuba ransomware actors use the CobaltStrike server to communicate with the compromised user account. One of the initial PowerShell script functions allocates memory space to run a base64-encoded payload. Once this payload is loaded into memory, it can be used to reach the remote command-and-control (C2) server and then deploy the next stage of files for the ransomware. The remote C2 server is located at the malicious URL kurvalarva.com."

The FBI included other attack information as well as a sample ransom note and email the attackers typically include.

Ransomware experts were somewhat surprised by the amount of money the group made considering their level of activity relative to other more prominent ransomware groups.

Emsisoft threat analyst Brett Callow said the report illustrated how lucrative the ransomware industry is considering the Cuba ransomware group is not in their top ten list in terms of activity.

[His data](#) shows 105 Cuba ransomware submissions this year compared to 653 for the Conti ransomware group.

"This really highlights how much money there is to be made from ransomware. Cuba is a relatively small player and if they made \$49 million, other outfits will have made considerably more," Callow told ZDNet. "And this, of course, is why ransomware is such a difficult problem to deal with. The massive rewards mean people consider the risks worthwhile."

[Since January](#), the group has operated a leak site, becoming one of the many ransomware groups that threatens to release stolen data if victims do not pay.

The McAfee Advanced Threat Research Team released a [detailed report](#) on the group in April, noting many of the same things the FBI found in their analysis. McAfee researchers also found that while the group had been around for years, it only recently began extorting victims with its leak site.

The group typically targets companies in the US, South America and Europe. McAfee said that the group has sold stolen data in some instances.

"Cuba ransomware is an older ransomware that has been active for the past few years. The actors behind it recently switched to leaking the stolen data to increase its impact and revenue, much like we have seen recently with other major ransomware campaigns," the McAfee report explained.

"In our analysis, we observed that the attackers had access to the network before the infection and were able to collect specific information in order to orchestrate the attack and have the greatest impact. The attackers operate using a set of PowerShell scripts that enables them to move laterally. The ransom note mentions that the data was exfiltrated before being encrypted."

	<p>The group made waves in February when they attacked payment processor Automatic Funds Transfer Services, forcing multiple US states to send out breach notification letters. First reported by Bleeping Computer, the attack involved the theft of "financial documents, correspondence with bank employees, account movements, balance sheets and tax documents." The incident also caused significant damage to the company's services for weeks.</p> <p>Multiple states were concerned because they used the company for a variety of services that gave them access to people's names, addresses, phone numbers, license plate numbers, VIN numbers, credit card information, paper checks and other billing details, according to Bleeping Computer. The state of California and multiple cities in Washington state were affected and sent out breach notification letters.</p> <p>Allan Liska, a ransomware expert with Recorded Future, said the FBI report also showed the observability problem with the ransomware landscape.</p> <p>"There were 28 victims published to the Cuba extortion site, but the FBI knew about at least 49 victims. We only knew about 1/2 of their victims," Liska said.</p> <p>"Despite the small number of victims, the FBI claiming they made at least \$43.9 million shows that ransomware continues to be extremely profitable for these threat actors. Their targets tended to be medium sized organizations and were spread around the world. I think it shows there is a lot we don't know."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Cyberattack strikes Maryland health dept.
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/05/maryland-health-department-cyberattack/
GIST	<p>A cyberattack took Maryland's health department offline this weekend, as officials worked to assess the extent of the intrusion.</p> <p>"The Maryland Security Operations Center is investigating a network security incident involving the Maryland Department of Health," Andy Owen, a department spokesman, said in a statement to The Washington Post. "Certain systems have been taken offline out of an abundance of caution and other precautions have and will be taken."</p> <p>Owen said that state officials were coordinating with federal and state law enforcement, and that the investigation is ongoing. He declined to say whether the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic had been affected by the cyberattack.</p> <p>A spokesperson for the office of Gov. Larry Hogan (R) referred questions to the health department.</p> <p>The Department of Health's webpage on Sunday was rerouted to the state's flagship webpage, www.maryland.gov, as officials went through individual systems to determine whether any information had been stolen.</p> <p>Meanwhile, dozens of health department services and resources were unavailable, including pages that invited Maryland residents to apply for Medicaid, get data on local nursing home safety and order free at-home testing for sexually transmitted infections.</p> <p>Ankit Gupta, a health-care executive, said that he was frustrated with the state's resources being offline, including information about the Medicaid program.</p> <p>"I was trying to research how they pay for opioid addiction treatment for my company, Bicycle Health," Gupta told The Washington Post.</p> <p>The cyberattack comes as local health officials continue to grapple with the pandemic and plan for potential new threats. Maryland health officials on Friday announced that three cases of omicron had been detected in the Baltimore metro area, the first evidence that the new coronavirus variant has reached the Washington region.</p>

HEADLINE	12/05 Military action against ransomware groups
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/us/politics/us-military-ransomware-cyber-command.html
GIST	<p>SIMI VALLEY, Calif. — The U.S. military has taken actions against ransomware groups as part of its surge against organizations launching attacks against American companies, the nation's top cyberwarrior said on Saturday, the first public acknowledgment of offensive measures against such organizations.</p> <p>Gen. Paul M. Nakasone, the head of U.S. Cyber Command and the director of the National Security Agency, said that nine months ago, the government saw ransomware attacks as the responsibility of law enforcement.</p> <p>But the attacks on Colonial Pipeline and JBS beef plants demonstrated that the criminal organizations behind them have been “impacting our critical infrastructure,” General Nakasone said.</p> <p>In response, the government is taking a more aggressive, better coordinated approach against this threat, abandoning its previous hands-off stance. Cyber Command, the N.S.A. and other agencies have poured resources into gathering intelligence on the ransomware groups and sharing that better understanding across the government and with international partners.</p> <p>“The first thing we have to do is to understand the adversary and their insights better than we’ve ever understood them before,” General Nakasone said in an interview on the sidelines of the Reagan National Defense Forum, a gathering of national security officials.</p> <p>General Nakasone would not describe the actions taken by his commands, nor what ransomware groups were targeted. But he said one of the goals was to “impose costs,” which is the term military officials use to describe punitive cyberoperations.</p> <p>“Before, during and since, with a number of elements of our government, we have taken actions and we have imposed costs,” General Nakasone said. “That’s an important piece that we should always be mindful of.”</p> <p>In September, Cyber Command diverted traffic around servers being used by the Russia-based REvil ransomware group, officials briefed on the operation have said. The operation came after government hackers from an allied country penetrated the servers, making it more difficult for the group to collect ransoms. After REvil detected the U.S. action, it shut down at least temporarily. That Cyber Command operation was reported last month by The Washington Post.</p> <p>Cyber Command and the N.S.A. also assisted the F.B.I. and the Justice Department in their efforts to seize and recover much of the cryptocurrency ransom paid by Colonial Pipeline. The Bitcoin payment was originally demanded by the Russian ransomware group known as DarkSide.</p> <p>The first known operation against a ransomware group by Cyber Command came before the 2020 election, when officials feared a network of computers known as TrickBot could be used to disrupt voting.</p> <p>Government officials have disagreed about how effective the stepped-up actions against ransomware groups have been. National Security Council officials have said activities by Russian groups have declined. The F.B.I. has been skeptical. Some outside groups saw a lull but predicted the ransomware groups would rebrand and come back in force.</p> <p>Asked if the United States had gotten better at defending itself from ransomware groups, General Nakasone said the country was “on an upward trajectory.” But adversaries modify their operations and continue to try to attack, he said.</p>

“We know much more about what our adversaries can and might do to us. This is an area where vigilance is really important,” he said, adding that “we can’t take our eye off it.”

Since taking over in May 2018, General Nakasone has worked to increase the pace of cyberoperations, focusing first on more robust defenses against foreign influence operations in the 2018 and 2020 elections. He has said that his commands have been able to draw broad lessons from those operations, which were [seen as successful](#), and others.

“Take a look at the broad perspective of adversaries that we’ve gone after over a period of five-plus years: It’s been nation-states, it’s been proxies, it’s been criminals, it’s been a whole wide variety of folks that each require a different strategy,” he said. “The fundamental piece that makes us successful against any adversary are speed, agility and unity of effort. You have to have those three.”

Last year’s discovery of [the SolarWinds hacking](#), in which Russian intelligence agents implanted software in the supply chain, giving them potential access to scores of government networks and thousands of business networks, was made by a private company and exposed flaws in America’s domestic cyberdefenses. The N.S.A.’s Cybersecurity Collaboration Center was set up to improve information sharing between the government and industry and to better detect future intrusions, General Nakasone said, although industry officials say more needs to be done to improve the flow of intelligence.

General Nakasone said those kinds of attacks are likely to continue, by ransomware groups and others. “What we have seen over the past year and what private industry has indicated is that we have seen a tremendous rise in terms of implants and in terms of zero-day vulnerabilities and ransomware,” he said, referring to an unknown coding flaw for which a patch does not exist. “I think that’s the world in which we live today.”

Speaking on a [panel at the Reagan Forum](#), General Nakasone said the domain of cyberspace had changed radically over the past 11 months with the rise of ransomware attacks and operations like SolarWinds. He said it was likely in any future military conflict that American critical infrastructure would be targeted.

“Borders mean less as we look at our adversaries, and whatever adversary that is, we should begin with the idea that our critical infrastructure will be targeted,” he told the panel.

Cyber Command has already begun building up its efforts to defend the next election. Despite the work to expose Russian, Chinese and Iranian efforts to meddle in American politics, General Nakasone said in the interview that foreign malign campaigns were likely to continue.

“I think that we should anticipate that in cyberspace, where the barriers to entry are so low, our adversaries are always going to be attempting to be involved,” he said.

The recipe for success in defending the election, he said, is to provide insight to the public about what adversaries are trying to do, share information about vulnerabilities and adversarial operations, and finally take action against groups trying to interfere with voting.

While that might take the form of cyberoperations against hackers, the response can be broader. Last month, the Justice Department announced the indictment of two Iranian hackers the government had identified as [being behind an attempt to influence the 2020 election](#).

“This really has to be a whole-of-government effort,” General Nakasone said. “This is why the diplomatic effort is important. This is why being able to look at a number of different levers within our government to be able to impact these type of adversaries is critical for our success.”

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/nyregion/bitcoin-mining-upstate-new-york.html
GIST	<p>A bitcoin mining operation is opening northeast of Niagara Falls this month on the site of the last working coal plant in New York State.</p> <p>Across the state, a former aluminum plant in Massena, already one of the biggest cryptocurrency sites in the United States, is expanding.</p> <p>And in Owego, a metal-recycling mogul with 11.3 million Instagram followers is making a gritty start-up with banks of computers in shipping containers next to a scrapyard.</p> <p>Soaring Bitcoin values may be the investment talk of Wall Street, but a few hours north, in upstate New York, the buzz is about companies that are scrambling to create the digital currency by “mining” it virtually with all types and sizes of computer farms constantly whizzing through transactions.</p> <p>In just a few years, a swath of northern and western New York has become one of the biggest Bitcoin producers in the country. The prospectors in this digital gold rush need lots of cheap electricity to run thousands of energy-guzzling computer rigs.</p> <p>The area — with its cheap hydroelectric power and abundance of shuttered power plants and old factories — was ripe for Bitcoin mining. The abandoned infrastructure, often with existing connections to the power grid, can readily be converted for Bitcoin mining.</p> <p>The companies say they are boosting local economies by bringing industry back and creating a crypto vanguard north of New York City, where Bitcoin stock, though unpredictable, hit record highs on Wall Street this year and which the incoming mayor, Eric Adams, envisions as a cryptocurrency hub.</p> <p>But the surge of activity has also prompted a growing outcry over the amount of electricity and pollution involved in mining for Bitcoin. Globally, cryptocurrency mining is said to consume more electricity annually than all of Argentina. China, once home to perhaps two-thirds of all crypto mining, banned the practice this year to help achieve its carbon-reduction goals, driving some miners to New York.</p> <p>As a result, environmental groups say, the Wild West-style scramble, coupled with a lack of restrictions on Bitcoin mining, is threatening the state’s own emission-reduction goals, which call for more renewable power and rapid reductions in fossil-fuel emissions.</p> <p>Bitcoin mining companies often require only basic building or planning permits from local governments, many of them faded industrial towns eager for any new business-tax revenue they can generate.</p> <p>In the Finger Lakes region, a former coal plant on pristine Seneca Lake has been converted into the Greenidge Generation natural gas-burning plant, which now powers Bitcoin mining on site. Near Buffalo, a Bitcoin company is seeking cheaper electricity by taking over a part-time gas-fired power plant and revving it up for round-the-clock use.</p> <p>The resulting uptick in greenhouse gas emissions will hasten the impact of climate change, say environmental groups like Earthjustice and the Sierra Club, which are monitoring upstate New York’s many old natural-gas plants that could be readily repurposed as Bitcoin mining operations.</p> <p>Plants that buy renewable energy from the grid have also drawn complaints. Since a large Bitcoin mining plant can use more electricity than most cities in the state, environmentalists warn that crypto mining will leave other areas dependent on fossil fuel power.</p> <p>The abundance of hydroelectric power and other kinds of renewable energy upstate helps large mining companies that buy it in bulk promote themselves as environmentally conscious.</p>

The plant opening northeast of Niagara Falls this month, in Somerset, N.Y., is part of a \$550 million project by Terawulf, a Bitcoin mining company. The project also includes a proposed 150-megawatt data center at a former coal plant on Lake Cayuga in the Finger Lakes.

Paul Prager, Terawulf's chief executive, said the Somerset plant would make use of hydroelectric power salvaged from the falls that is otherwise difficult to send to other locations because of grid congestion.

And because the plant would comply with state environmental rules and not cause air pollution, he said, "we look at regulations as a really good thing."

But despite requiring companies that engage in many aspects of Bitcoin activity, including trading the currency, to obtain a license, New York places no restrictions on mining.

Some municipalities, including [Plattsburgh and Massena](#), two early Bitcoin-mining destinations near the Canadian border, have resorted to moratoriums on the practice.

The bans have since been lifted, but some lawmakers want to make New York one of the first states to prohibit certain types of Bitcoin mining. In June, the State Senate approved a bill that would have imposed a statewide moratorium on some fossil-fuel-powered mining; the legislation died in the Assembly.

"It has been easy for these companies to fly under the radar because the whole industry is confusing to understand, at first," said Assemblywoman Anna R. Kelles, a Democrat who represents the Ithaca area and sponsored the bill. "It's too new of an industry not to be regulated federally or statewide in respect to greenhouse gas emission and the effect on water and air." (Ms. Kelles said she planned to revive the bill next year.)

For the same reason, some environmental activists have urged Gov. Kathy Hochul to issue an executive order to ban some crypto mining.

In 2017, the shuttered coal plant on Seneca Lake was converted into a natural gas-burning plant by Greenidge, which was owned at the time by Atlas Holdings, a private equity firm with \$6 billion in holdings. Greenidge now promotes itself as the first publicly traded company with a bitcoin mine integrated as a part of a power plant. The plant has a 106-megawatt capacity, allowing it to generate enough electricity to power around 85,000 homes.

Greenidge's chief executive, Dale Irwin, said in a statement that the plant was "creating a new economic engine bringing a piece of the world's digital future to upstate New York."

But the plant's greenhouse gas emissions have increased along with its mining activity, and so has opposition from some local residents who call the plant an environmental threat to this rural stretch of vineyards, farm stands, pristine waterways and world-class gorges.

A [local blogger](#) has reported on Greenidge's permit to draw more than 100 million gallons of water a day from Seneca Lake for cooling purposes and to then return it at warmer levels to a nearby trout stream tributary.

Mr. Irwin said the outflow posed no danger and that lake temperatures, measured daily by independent sources, had not been affected.

And although the plant's emissions have increased since 2019, he said, they were still well below state-permitted levels. The plant poses no environmental threat, he insisted.

Greenidge is applying to the state to renew air emissions permits, and opponents see an opportunity for the state to curb the company's expansion.

Elected officials, including U.S. Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Chuck Schumer, have asked state and federal regulators to review the plant's application closely.

With political and public pressure mounting, Basil Seggos, the state's environmental conservation commissioner, [wrote on Twitter](#) in September that "Greenidge has not shown compliance with NY's climate law." He urged residents to participate in the public comment period regarding the permit renewal. To build several structures at the plant, Greenidge obtained local planning board approval in April from the town of Torrey.

Patrick H. Flynn, 79, a farmer and the Torrey town supervisor, called Greenidge a boon to the area and said that renewable energy was "overrated."

"We can't restrict a business," he said. "Whether they're making Bitcoin, it's no different than raising cattle or pigs or chickens."

Yvonne Taylor, the vice president of Seneca Lake Guardian, a local conservation group, accused state officials of failing the public by not requiring an environmental review before issuing permits to Greenidge, and by essentially leaving approvals to local governments.

"It can't be a town-by-town fight," said Ms. Taylor, a speech pathologist whose family has lived on Seneca Lake for generations. "We need the governor to step in. If she wants to be a champion on climate, she needs to adopt a moratorium on this type of energy-intensive cryptocurrency, or we'll never achieve our climate goals."

Greenidge's case is not unique. Digihost, the Bitcoin company in Buffalo that is reviving a gas-fired power plant, has faced criticism that the increased gas emissions will affect areas long plagued by industrial toxins. Among them is [Love Canal](#), the Niagara Falls neighborhood that became infamous for the toxic landfill that harmed hundreds of residents.

But local officials approved Digihost's plans largely because the environmental toll of the new operation seemed minimal compared with the benefits the company was expected to bring, including new jobs and up to \$1 million in annual fees for municipal water to cool the plant, said Robert Pecoraro, the president of the common council in North Tonawanda, where the plant is.

Digihost officials say the plant will operate within state emissions limits, begin shifting to more renewable energy sources over time, feed the grid when needed and help western New York keep up with the tech industry while creating at least 30 permanent jobs.

Mr. Pecoraro stood outside the gas plant recently and watched workers build a large shed to house the new servers. He said he did not understand the opposition to Digihost and the economic boost it would bring to the area.

"A lot of industry has left over the years," he said. "And here we are trying to bring Digihost in and people are fighting us on that."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 State Dept. workers targeted by malware
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dggxk/us-state-department-employees-targeted-with-nso-group-malware
GIST	<p>The controversial spyware maker NSO Group said it terminated access to its products for a customer who allegedly spied on at least nine U.S. State Department employees, in what would be one of the highest-profile cases of abuse of its spyware.</p> <p>On Friday, Reuters reported that Apple had warned at least nine State Department employees that they had been targeted with NSO's Pegasus spyware, citing four anonymous sources.</p>

An NSO spokesperson told Motherboard in a statement that after being informed of the issue by Reuters, and “before any investigation under our compliance policy, we have decided to immediately terminate relevant customers’ access to the system, due to the severity of the allegations.”

“On top of the independent investigation, NSO will cooperate with any relevant government authority and present the full information we will have,” the spokesperson said. “To clarify, the installation of our software by the customer occurs via phone numbers. As stated before, NSO’s technologies are blocked from working on US (+1) numbers. Once the software is sold to the licensed customer, NSO has no way to know who the targets of the customers are, as such, we were not and could not have been aware of this case.”

This is the latest in a seemingly endless series of scandals surrounding the Israeli spyware giant. Over the summer, [a consortium of international news media outlets](#), working along with Amnesty International and French NGO Forbidden Stories, revealed several cases where NSO customers abused its technology to target heads of state, journalists, and human rights activists.

In early November, [the U.S. government announced that it had put NSO on a blacklist](#), forbidding U.S. companies and individuals from selling software and services to the company. A few days later, [the newly appointed NSO CEO resigned before even starting his new job](#). Two weeks later, [Apple filed a lawsuit against the company](#), alleging that it and its customers are abusing Apple infrastructure to target iPhone users. [Apple has also recently warned several customers](#) that they were targets of NSO spyware. That included American citizens, according to the Reuters report.

Reuters reported that the U.S. State Department employees targeted were based in Uganda or focused on matters related to the African country. Citing an anonymous senior Biden administration official, the targeting of U.S. diplomats abroad is one of the reasons the U.S. government put NSO on its blacklist.

Senator Ron Wyden, who has been [particularly vocal about the activities of malware vendors](#) such as NSO, told Motherboard in a statement that “Companies that enable their customers to hack U.S. government employees are a threat to America’s national security and should be treated as such by the government. I want to be sure the State Department and the rest of the federal government has the tools to detect hacks and respond to them quickly. Federal agencies shouldn’t have to rely on the generosity of private companies to know when their phones and devices are hacked.”

A State Department spokesperson told Motherboard that it was unable to confirm the specific hacks, but that the State Department takes its responsibility to protect information seriously. The spokesperson added that the State Department continuously updates its security posture in response to changing tactics by adversaries, and reiterated that the Biden and Harris Administration is taking action against the proliferation and misuse of tools used for repression.

Apple declined to comment, and instead pointed to an earlier blog post announcing its lawsuit against NSO Group.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Crypto scammers lure victims: phishing site
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/epxxe7/received-some-random-cryptocurrency-it-might-be-a-phishing-scam
GIST	<p>Cryptocurrency scammers are sending custom tokens that lure victims into visiting a phishing site designed to steal crypto from their wallets, according to reports made by observers and people targeted by the scam.</p> <p>A woman who goes by "Shegenerates," who is a Solidity developer, was among the first to raise the alarm about this new scam. In a tweet on Thursday, she wrote that someone sent her "airdropped" tokens supposedly worth \$30,000, but in reality it was a “sophisticated scam.”</p>

Shегenerates told Motherboard in an online chat that the scams work like this: scammers send a useless token, which can't be rejected by the recipient due to the nature of blockchains. This kind of token "airdrop" has become a popular way for web3 projects to reward early users and investors when, say, a protocol launches a governance token. The token Shегenerates highlighted was named after a website, which is very odd. According to Shегenerates, that website is a phishing site that asks victims for permission to access their Metamask crypto wallet. If the victim approves, then the scammers can drain their funds.

With the value of cryptocurrency climbing over the course of 2021, scammers and hackers have increasingly targeted not only crypto exchanges and [organizations](#), but also individuals who own Bitcoin, Ethereum, or any other cryptocoin or token.

"We're seeing an increasing number of phishing scams that attempt to take control of peoples' web wallets. This one is novel because people are being sent ("airdropped") tokens, and directed towards a website that claims to be a decentralized exchange," Tom Robinson, the co-founder of blockchain analysis firm Elliptic, told Motherboard in an email. "[The scam is] luring them to a site where they're told they can sell the tokens they've been given—but the site actually steals whatever is in their wallets."

Interestingly, the scammer appears to have added their own liquidity to the token to make it look like it's worth something when the victim attempts to swap it on a decentralized exchange like Uniswap.

According to Shегenerates, attempts to swap the tokens have resulted in failed transactions, which are posted to the blockchain forever and may indicate to scammers which victims are willing to interact with tokens of unknown provenance for a quick profit. It would also mean that the scammer would reap a fee reward in the event of a successful swap.

It's unclear how many people have been targeted, or have actually fallen for this scam. Jonathan Levin, the co-founder of blockchain monitoring firm Chainalysis, said that this kind of scam "is gonna be something hard to combat."

In her tweets, Shегenerates warned people to never interact with tokens or smart contracts that get sent out of the blue, and to never go to custom websites that are specific to a token.

"If a token name has a domain name in it, that is a big red flag not to go to that website and get phished," she wrote.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Bitcoin tumbles after Wall Street selloff
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/bitcoin-price-tumbles-after-wall-street-selloff-11638621435?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies fell sharply Saturday, another sign that investors were pulling back from riskier bets after this week's stock-market selloff.</p> <p>Bitcoin, the largest cryptocurrency by market value, plunged more than 20% to \$42,000 at midnight Eastern Time on Saturday before bouncing back, according to data from CoinDesk. It was trading at \$49,000 Saturday evening, down about 9% in 24 hours.</p> <p>The declines were widespread across the cryptouniverse. Other widely traded cryptocurrencies including Solana, Dogecoin and Shiba Inu coin lost more than a fifth of their value.</p> <p>Ether, the second-largest cryptocurrency, also tumbled by more than 15%, but only had a 4% decline by Saturday evening.</p> <p>Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies are notoriously volatile and often plunge for mysterious reasons. Disquiet in the stock market over the new Omicron variant of Covid-19 and the Federal Reserve's response to inflation might have played a role.</p>

Another possible factor accelerating the bitcoin selloff was the unwinding of heavily leveraged crypto derivatives, said Noelle Acheson, head of market insights at cryptolender Genesis Global Trading. She pointed to a large sell order that might have triggered margin calls and liquidations for investors.

Leveraged trading of cryptocurrency derivatives has become a huge business for exchanges such as Binance, [the world's largest](#). Traders use future contracts to bet on the rise or fall of a specific cryptocurrency. To make returns more attractive, they are allowed to make oversize bets with little money. When the price of cryptocurrencies falls precipitously, margin calls force investors to liquidate.

The price of bitcoin seesawed later Saturday after El Salvador President Nayib Bukele, whose country [adopted bitcoin as a national currency](#) in September, said in a Twitter post that the country had bought 150 coins for an average of \$48,670 each. "El Salvador just bought the dip!" he said. He later wrote that the country had "Missed the f***ing bottom by 7 minutes," followed by a laughing emoji.

It isn't the first time El Salvador has [jumped into the market](#) after a big price fall. The interventions have turned the tiny impoverished nation into an informal central bank that props up the digital currency, similar to the way mainstream central banks intervene in foreign-exchange markets to keep currencies stable.

Cryptocurrencies move much more than stocks or government-issued currencies. The week was a [roller-coaster ride for the stock market](#), with investors uncertain about the course of the pandemic and inflation. The [Omicron variant](#) has triggered [new restrictions world-wide](#), just as travel was starting to bounce back. Scientists are trying to establish how effective current vaccines will be against Omicron.

Fears of another economic slowdown mixed with heightened worry by the Federal Reserve over inflation. Earlier this week, Chairman Jerome Powell said the central bank was prepared to pull back its easy-money policies quicker than previously expected, opening the door to raising interest rates in the first half of next year.

Higher rates make holding speculative assets such as bitcoin less attractive. When the Federal Reserve raised rates in 2017 and 2018, bitcoin prices fell dramatically, referred to among crypto aficionados as a bitcoin winter. The coin took off again during the pandemic. Bitcoin hit an all-time high on Nov. 9 of \$67,802.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Spy tool state-sponsored hack of Ugandans
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/world/africa/uganda-hack-pegasus-spyware.html ?
GIST	<p>NAIROBI, Kenya — Apple warned two Ugandan journalists and an opposition figure last week that their iPhones may have been hacked by a state-sponsored surveillance entity, the targeted people said on Saturday, and at least one attack appeared to have employed spyware from an Israeli company blacklisted by the United States.</p> <p>The latest revelations add Uganda to the list of countries where journalists, human rights activists and lawyers have been targeted using the sophisticated Israeli-made spyware, known as Pegasus.</p> <p>The disclosure of the Apple warning notices to the three Ugandans came one day after reports that American diplomats in the East African nation also had their iPhones hacked with Pegasus.</p> <p>Those diplomats were the first American government officials known to have been targeted by the Pegasus tool, which is designed to sneak into a user's phone and give the invader access to its contents without being detected. Apple has said iPhones equipped with its latest software are not at risk.</p> <p>Last month, the United States blacklisted the NSO Group, the Israeli company that created Pegasus, after saying its tools were used to target government officials, dissidents and journalists worldwide. The blacklisting has created a source of tension between the United States and Israel, a staunch American ally.</p>

NSO has said that it had no awareness of these attacks, adding in a statement that the company was “committed to human rights and the protection of the national security and safety of the U.S. and its allies.”

The State Department would not confirm the breaches of American diplomats’ phones in Uganda, but said the U.S. government took measures to protect sensitive information. “Like every large organization with a global presence, we closely monitor cybersecurity conditions, and are continuously updating our security posture to adapt to changing tactics by adversaries,” a department spokesman said in an emailed statement.

Raymond Mujuni, a Ugandan investigative journalist, said he had received an email from Apple on Nov. 23 warning that it believed he was “being targeted by state-sponsored attackers who are trying to remotely compromise the iPhone associated with your Apple ID.”

Canary Mugume, another reporter, said he received a similar communication two days later, telling him that “these attackers are likely targeting you individually because of who you are or what you do.” Norbert Mao, a Ugandan opposition leader and former presidential candidate, also confirmed he had received the same email from Apple.

Apple recommended that all three users upgrade their iPhones with the latest operating systems, saying the attacks were “ineffective against iOS 15 and later.” Mr. Mao said he “did that immediately.”

Apple also suggested they enlist “emergency security assistance” with the New York-based digital nonprofit group, Access Now. Mr. Mujuni said that he reached out to the group, which following an analysis, concluded that the Pegasus software had been used to compromise his phone.

It was not immediately clear who might have targeted the trio’s phones or if Mr. Mao’s and Mr. Mugume’s phones had been targeted using the Pegasus software. An Apple spokesman declined to comment.

Ofwono Opondo, the Ugandan government spokesman, and Okello Oryem, the state minister for foreign affairs, did not respond to multiple calls and messages seeking comment.

Peter Micek, the general counsel at Access Now, said he was not able to comment on particular cases but that the group’s [helpline service](#) had been “receiving more requests related to Pegasus in large part due to Apple sending notice about our services to those who may have been targeted.”

In July, [a consortium of journalists published The Pegasus Project](#), which showed how dozens of countries had deployed the tool to muzzle dissent. The Pegasus tool allows users to remotely extract a phone’s contents, tap into the camera and microphone and access calls, location information, photographs and messages.

In Africa, countries listed in The Pegasus Project included Togo, where religious leaders and opposition leaders were targeted. Also on the list was [Morocco](#), where activists who were targeted either fled the country or were imprisoned.

Other African countries, in which politicians, journalists, dissidents or military officials were hacked, included Rwanda, Burundi and South Africa. Among those targeted was Carine Kanimba, the daughter of [Paul Rusesabagina](#), a vocal critic of President Paul Kagame of Rwanda, who is currently [serving](#) a 25-year prison term in Kigali, the capital. Mr. Kagame has repeatedly [denied](#) that Rwanda obtained or used the Israeli-made software.

In recent years, Uganda has tightened censorship and expanded its digital surveillance capabilities, [particularly against opposition figures](#). President Yoweri Museveni, [a key Western ally](#), has also cracked down on critics, with his government engaging in [a campaign of arrests and disappearances](#) following a contentious election in January.

	<p>Both Mr. Mujuni and Mr. Mugume, the journalists, have extensively reported on these clampdowns and the tensions that gripped Uganda before and after the vote.</p> <p>In the weeks before being contacted by Apple about the hack, both said they had received phishing messages from a local Ugandan number asking them to participate in a sales deal or click on a link that would win them up to \$1,000. Mr. Mugume said the analysis on his phone had showed there were unsuccessful attempts to access his location data using food-delivery or ride-hailing applications.</p> <p>Since receiving the alert messages from Apple, Mr. Mujuni said he had been worried about whether any of his journalistic sources may have been compromised.</p> <p>“It’s very concerning for me,” he said.</p>
Return to Top	

Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 Gunmen attack Niger military base
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-12-06/gunmen-attack-niger-military-base-killing-at-least-12
GIST	<p>NIAMEY, Niger (AP) — Extremist gunmen attacked a military camp in Niger near its southeastern border with Burkina Faso, killing at least 12 soldiers, the West Africa country's interior ministry said.</p> <p>Extremist rebels riding 100 motorcycles attacked the military camp of Fonion, in the Gorouel area, the ministry said in a statement late Sunday.</p> <p>Soldiers fought back and inflicted “enormous damage to the enemy,” said the government statement.</p> <p>“Dozens of terrorists have been killed,” said the press release from Niger's interior ministry without specifying the exact number. The military is pursuing the rebels through land and air operations with reinforcements from the capital, Niamey, and other military bases, according to the statement.</p> <p>“The precise assessment will be communicated at the end of the military operations which are still in progress,” the press release concludes.</p> <p>The Fonion military camp is located near the village of Tera, where protests against the French convoy en route to Gao, in northern Mali, left 3 dead and 18 injured last week.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Mali: militants fire on bus; 31 killed
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/04/mali-militants-fire-on-bus-killing-at-least-31-people
GIST	<p>Militants have killed at least 31 people in central Mali when they fired upon a bus ferrying people to a local market and attacked a UN convoy in the north of the country in a region racked by a violent insurgency.</p> <p>The bus was attacked on Friday by unidentified gunmen as it travelled its twice-weekly route from the village of Songho to a market in Bandiagara six miles (10km) away, said Moulaye Guindo, the mayor of the nearby town of Bankass.</p> <p>“Armed men ... shot at the vehicle, slashed the tires, and shot at the people,” Guindo said.</p> <p>He and another local official said at least 31 were confirmed dead, with many more wounded or missing.</p> <p>The villages sit in the heart of the Mopti region, an epicentre of violence in Mali fuelled by insurgents linked to al-Qaida and Islamic State.</p>

	<p>An internal security memo said first responders to the scene of the latest attack discovered 25 burned bodies in the truck.</p> <p>Images circulated on social media showed the smouldering frame of a passenger bus filled with bodies, still slumped over in their seats. Reuters could not independently verify the authenticity of the images.</p> <p>Also on Friday, unidentified armed men attacked a convoy belonging to the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali, killing one civilian worker and wounding another, the mission said.</p> <p>The convoy was travelling from the northern city of Kidal to Gao and came under fire about 62 miles north-east of the town of Bourem, the mission said.</p> <p>Jihadist attacks have surged across Africa's Sahel region, killing thousands and displacing millions across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.</p> <p>On Wednesday two soldiers were killed and several more wounded in northern Benin when Islamist militants attacked a border security post. The raid in Porga region was the second in Benin this week. Islamist militants attacked an army patrol in the department of Alibori on Tuesday morning, the army chief, Col Fructueux Gbaguidi said in an internal statement on Thursday.</p> <p>The army killed one jihadist in Tuesday's attack and another on Wednesday night, he said.</p> <p>Militant attacks are rare in Benin, but groups linked to al-Qaida and Islamic State that are active in its northern neighbours have made increasing incursions south.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/05 Taliban summary killings ex-soldiers, police
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/05/west-condemns-taliban-over-summary-killings-of-ex-soldiers-and-police
GIST	<p>The US has led a group of western nations and allies in condemnation of the Taliban over the "summary killings" of former members of the Afghan security forces reported by rights groups, demanding quick investigations.</p> <p>"We are deeply concerned by reports of summary killings and enforced disappearances of former members of the Afghan security forces as documented by Human Rights Watch and others," read a statement by the US, EU, Australia, Britain, Japan and others, which was released by the state department on Saturday.</p> <p>"We underline that the alleged actions constitute serious human rights abuses and contradict the Taliban's announced amnesty," the group of nations said, as it called on Afghanistan's new rulers to ensure the amnesty was enforced and upheld across the country and throughout their ranks.</p> <p>Earlier this week Human Rights Watch released a report that it says documents the summary execution or enforced disappearance of 47 former members of the Afghan national security forces, other military personnel, police and intelligence agents who had either surrendered to or been apprehended by the Taliban from mid-August through October.</p> <p>"Reported cases must be investigated promptly and in a transparent manner, those responsible must be held accountable, and these steps must be clearly publicised as an immediate deterrent to further killings and disappearances," the countries – which include Canada, New Zealand, Romania, Ukraine and several European nations – said in their statement.</p> <p>"We will continue to measure the Taliban by their actions."</p>

The Taliban took power in Afghanistan in August as the US-backed government in Kabul and the country's military collapsed.

Their return to power came nearly 20 years after they were driven out by US forces, who ended a fundamentalist regime that earned opprobrium for its brutal treatment of women, failure to uphold human rights and harsh interpretation of Islam.

Today's Taliban leaders, keen to gain international respectability, have pledged their regime will be different.

But the new government has continued to carry out violent punishments, and the UN has expressed concern about "credible allegations" that the Taliban have carried out reprisal killings since their victory, despite the promises of amnesty for the fallen government's troops.

In its report, HRW said Taliban leaders have directed surrendering security forces to register with authorities in order to be screened for ties to certain military or special forces units, and to receive a letter guaranteeing their safety.

"However, the Taliban have used these screenings to detain and summarily execute or forcibly disappear individuals within days of their registration, leaving their bodies for their relatives or communities to find," HRW said.

Washington held talks with Taliban officials earlier this week, the second round of discussions since US forces left.

At the talks, in Doha, US officials urged the hardline Islamist group to provide access to education for women and girls across the country.

It also "expressed deep concern regarding allegations of human rights abuses", a US spokesperson said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 NJ military base houses 11,000 Afghans
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/nyregion/afghan-refugees-nj-military-base.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=New%20York
GIST	<p>JOINT BASE McGUIRE-DIX-LAKEHURST, N.J. — Sana Khairi, an 18-year-old Afghan with wide brown eyes, knew precisely how long she had been living in a temporary encampment on a New Jersey military base: 47 days.</p> <p>After fleeing Afghanistan as the Taliban seized power, she and her mother and four siblings were routed through Germany before arriving at what has become known as Liberty Village, a community that swelled nearly overnight to hold a population larger than half the towns in New Jersey.</p> <p>There are 11,000 people living there now — more evacuees than on any of the six other U.S. bases still hosting families evacuated from Afghanistan as America's 20-year war in the country reached its chaotic end in late August.</p> <p>It is the only location still accepting new Afghan arrivals from overseas, according to the Department of Homeland Security. It is likely to be among the last sites to shut down, based on its housing capacity and proximity to Philadelphia, the main U.S. port of entry for the new arrivals, officials said Thursday as they offered the first media tour of the encampment.</p> <p>As many as four plane loads of Afghans continue to arrive in New Jersey each week from overseas safe havens where 3,300 people are waiting their turn to enter the United States as part of the largest evacuation of war refugees since Vietnam.</p>

Roughly 37,000 of the approximately 73,000 non-U. S. citizens evacuated from Afghanistan are still waiting to be resettled in cities and towns across the country by refugee agencies struggling with a [shortage of affordable housing](#) and the sheer magnitude of the operation.

“One of the biggest challenges is the pace of arrivals,” said Avigail Ziv, the executive director for New York and New Jersey at the [International Rescue Committee](#), a refugee resettlement organization. “This is a really unprecedented situation.”

Ms. Khairi and her family have been told that they are being relocated to Buffalo, a city they have no ties to, but where she hopes to enroll in college and eventually study medicine.

Her father, whose work with the American war effort helped to win the family’s safe passage to the U.S., remains in Afghanistan, where the [economy has all but collapsed](#) and [hunger is widespread](#).

“There is so much worry because of the winter there,” Ms. Khairi said through an interpreter. “Already there’s no jobs, there is no money. So how can they survive?”

In New Jersey, about 3,500 people have left for permanent homes since the first Afghans began arriving on the sprawling base southeast of Trenton on Aug. 24.

“The only thing that we can say is ‘thank you,’” said Ghulam Eshan Sharifi, 67, a lab technician and pharmacist from Kabul who was aligned with the American military during the war. “I advised my children, my grandsons, to be harnessed to this country, to work hard for this country.”

But boredom is nearly as palpable as hope on the base. There is also fear.

The No. 1 question new arrivals ask is about family left behind.

“How do I get them out of Afghanistan?” Capt. Ron Miller of the U.S. Space Force, a Pashto speaker who leads a team responsible for acclimating newcomers, said of the common concern. “How do I keep them safe?”

The site is carved into three villages, each with its own so-called mayor — a high-ranking military official responsible for managing the area and holding town-hall-style meetings. Afghans are housed in either military barracks or studio-like rooms in one of 19 reinforced white tents that can fit 512 people each.

An expansive medical area includes a pharmacy, pediatric and dental care, X-ray machines and a lab.

In the first month, 24 babies were born. Since then, 76 more newborns arrived.

During the tightly controlled tour of the base, men could be seen standing in small groups, talking. Some were dressed in traditional Afghan tunics, patterned scarves and sandals; others wore Nike sneakers and puffer jackets. Women pushed strollers near a playground and one of several dining halls. Children were everywhere.

Some theft and minor assaults have been reported, homeland security officials said, but no felony crimes. More than 100 English-language classes are offered each week. Academic courses for the 3,000 children living on the base are planned, but there is no firm starting date.

As the days grow darker and colder, some families have become discouraged, aid workers and current and former residents said.

Some have even made the difficult decision to walk off the base on their own, unaided by a resettlement agency — a permitted but discouraged choice that is known as an “independent departure.”

“There is frustration,” said a 30-year-old Afghan man living temporarily in Montclair, N.J., who walked out of the gates of the base late last month with his pregnant wife and two sons, one of whom has epilepsy. “People are upset.”

“The day that I left, there was a big line of the independent departures,” added the man, who said he worked with U.S. forces as a combat translator for 10 years and requested anonymity because of a concern for the safety of relatives still living in Kabul.

His family, he said, was slated to be relocated in California, but they chose to leave the base on their own and remain in New Jersey so that their 5-year-old son could continue to be treated for epilepsy at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

“For people who have small children, it’s very difficult,” said Silen Hussainzada, a 25-year-old woman at the military base who evacuated from Kabul in late summer and is fluent in English. “There are some activities for them, but there are not many.”

Ms. Hussainzada, who arrived in the country alone and has become a volunteer language teacher and a fierce advocate for women, said it was growing more common for people to choose to leave without the immediate support of a resettlement agency.

She expects an agency to help her settle in Dayton, Ohio, where she plans to continue studying law.

Like Ms. Hussainzada, a vast majority of the evacuees who arrive in the United States will be placed in communities by one of nine national refugee agencies, which work with hundreds of smaller community organizations. Eight in 10 of the 35,000 Afghans already in new communities got there with help from a resettlement agency, said Angelo Fernandez, a homeland security spokesman.

Everyone who leaves the base must have satisfied rigorous security checks and be fully vaccinated. Many who chose to leave on their own have family already living in the United States or close friends who arranged lodging.

Katy Swartz, who helps lead the effort for the State Department, was on the New Jersey base when the first Afghans arrived, and said she often watched as families boarded buses to leave. “It’s incredibly emotional,” she said.

She acknowledged that some evacuees might be disappointed with their new assigned hometowns, or might be impatient to leave.

“But as people have departed on their own,” she said, “I think some messages have come back, ‘This is really hard.’”

Representative Mikie Sherrill, Democrat of New Jersey, toured Liberty Village on Tuesday.

“I’m so hopeful for these evacuees — many of whom saved lives of American servicemen and women,” said Ms. Sherrill, a former Navy helicopter pilot.

But she said it was clear that the operation was entering a “very stressful period.”

“I do want to continue to make sure that if they’re going to be there for any length of time that we make sure the children can start to get into K-12 education and become familiar with our American system,” Ms. Sherrill said.

The operation, “Allies Welcome,” is overseen by a host of federal agencies and thousands of U.S. troops. Its ultimate end date is largely dependent on how quickly the refugee agencies can complete the resettlement effort.

	<p>“We don’t feel pressure,” Ms. Swartz said.</p> <p>And they continue to make improvements at the base, some of which appeared designed for the long term.</p> <p>About 300,000 tons of construction gravel have been laid on a previously open field to create roadways that make it easier to push strollers, and eliminate the mud common after rain. An initial overwhelming but scattershot stream of donations has been tailored to each base's specific needs using an Amazon wish list. The housing tents were reinforced with vinyl-like siding to keep the heat in during winter. All meal preparation is now done on site.</p> <p>As Ms. Khairi dreams of becoming a doctor, she creates art — including a poem and paintings displayed at the base for visitors. She said she was immensely grateful for the opportunity to pursue her ambitions freely in the United States.</p> <p>But she said she found it painful to think about women her age still living in Afghanistan.</p> <p>“I have more dreams to accomplish,” she said, “and I’m worried about those girls’ dreams.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/03 Taliban award fighters land in Afghanistan
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/world/asia/afghanistan-land-ownership-taliban.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — For decades, roughly a thousand families called the low-slung mud-walled neighborhood of Firqa home. Some moved in during the 1990s civil war, while others were provided housing under the previous government.</p> <p>Soon after the Taliban takeover on Aug. 15, the new government told them all to get out.</p> <p>Ghullam Farooq, 40, sat in the darkness of his shop in Firqa last month, describing how armed Taliban fighters came at night, expelling him at gunpoint from his home in the community, a neighborhood of Kandahar city in southern Afghanistan.</p> <p>“All the Taliban said was: ‘Take your stuff and go,’” he said.</p> <p>Those who fled or were forcibly removed were quickly replaced with Taliban commanders and fighters.</p> <p>Thousands of Afghans are facing such traumatic dislocations as the new Taliban government uses property to compensate its fighters for years of military service, amid a crumbling economy and a lack of cash.</p> <p>Over decades, after every period of upheaval in Afghanistan, property becomes a crucial form of wealth for those in power to reward followers. But this arbitrary redistribution also leaves thousands displaced and fuels endless disputes in a country where the land ownership system is so informal that few people hold any documentation for the ground they call their own.</p> <p>Just as during past changes in government, distributing property to Taliban disciples in swaths of rural farmland and in desirable urban neighborhoods has turned into at least a short-term recourse to keep stability within the Taliban ranks.</p> <p>“Who has the guns gets the land,” said Patricia Gossman, the associate Asia director for Human Rights Watch. “It’s an old, long continuing story.”</p> <p>In a largely pastoral nation split by rugged mountain ranges, dotted with deserts and little forest, land is one of the most important assets and a flashpoint, fueling blood feuds between neighbors, ethnic groups and warlords as power has changed hands. Conflicting legal systems dictating land ownership and a lack of documentation have further destabilized the property market through the generations.</p>

The country is slightly smaller in land area than Texas, with a population that has grown in past decades to around 39 million people. Yet, only one-eighth of Afghanistan's land is farmable and shrinking under a crippling drought and changes wrought from climate change.

Today's land disputes in Afghanistan can be largely traced to the Soviet-backed regime that came to power in the late 1970s, which redistributed property across the country. This quickly fueled tensions as land was confiscated and given to the poor and landless under the banner of socialism.

Land redistribution continued to play out, first during the civil war in the early 1990s, and then under the rise of the Taliban. After the U.S. invasion in 2001, those same commanders who were once defeated by the Taliban went about distributing and [stealing land](#) once more, this time with the backing of the newly installed U.S.-supported government. American and NATO military forces contributed to the problem by seizing property for bases [and doing little to compensate landowners](#).

Attempts by the Western-backed government over the past two decades to formalize land ownership and property rights ultimately proved futile as the incentives to take advantage of the system overwhelmed efforts to regularize it.

Now more than three months after the Taliban's rise to power, its administrators are in a similar position, but with no official policy regarding land ownership.

"We are still analyzing and investigating how to honor land deeds and titles for people," Bilal Karimi, a Taliban spokesman, said.

Local Taliban leaders have been seizing and reallocating property for years in districts they captured to reward fighters and the families of their dead with land to farm or sell for profit.

In 2019, when the Taliban arrived at Mullah Abdul Salam's modest poppy farm in Musa Qala, in Helmand Province, he faced an impossible choice. Like many poor farmers in rural Afghanistan, he had no legal deed to prove he owned the ground he had cultivated for years.

So the Taliban gave him an ultimatum: Either pay a lump sum to keep his land or give it up.

"We came early and we had the right to the land," Mr. Salam recalled, standing on the edge of his poppy field in Musa Qala, shovel in hand. "It had to be ours."

For some time, the land in Musa Qala was unclaimed, undocumented and written off as unfarmable, except by a few farmers such as Mr. Salam. Then the ground became more fertile with the widespread growth of solar power that enabled farmers to run well pumps, at far lower expense than use of conventional fuel. The Taliban tried to strike a balance by allowing the poor farmers to remain at relatively small cost, while allocating unclaimed plots to its fighters.

Khoi, a brother of a Taliban fighter who goes by one name, was among the family members of the militants who received land in Musa Qala two years ago. Since then, he said, fellow Taliban veterans had profited by selling portions of the property gifted to them.

"There is no more land for the Taliban to distribute here, if they could, they would," he said.

With no official guidance, Taliban officials have now resorted to the same practices throughout the country that carved up the area around Mr. Salam's farm.

But as the Taliban distribute property, parts of the population have been left confused and angered by the actions of their new government, which suspiciously resemble the behavior of its predecessors.

In Takhar Province, a historically anti-Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan's north, Taliban fighters have evicted people — including some who had lived there for more than 40 years — in several districts, saying the land was unfairly distributed by previous governments, said a former Afghan lawmaker on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation against her family.

Takhar residents, the former lawmaker said, have started to question whether Taliban administrators can run the country any more effectively than their predecessor, given how they are following the same practices as past governments.

“The greatest issue for the Taliban going forward will be to deal with land documentation and legalization,” said Fazal Muzhary, a former researcher at [Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), a policy research group, who focused on land ownership in Afghanistan. “So when the Taliban want to legalize or demarcate lands, they will also need to take back the lands from people who grabbed them in any period, in the 70s, 80s, 90s, 2000s and so on. This will be very challenging for them.”

In central Afghanistan, property disputes of another nature are playing out: the marginalization and displacement of ethnic minorities in order to seize their arable land. Taliban leaders have long persecuted and antagonized the Hazaras, a mostly Shiite minority, and in recent months, the new government has watched as local strongmen evicted hundreds of families.

In September, Nasrullah, 27, and his family fled their village in Daikundi Province, along with around 200 families who left nearly everything, he said.

Such displacements have upended more than a dozen villages in central Afghanistan, affecting more than 2,800 Hazaras, according to a Human Rights Watch [report](#).

In recent weeks, local courts have overturned some seizures, allowing some families to return. But for most, the evictions have been traumatic.

“In each village the Taliban put a checkpoint, and the people aren't allowed to take anything but our clothes and some flour,” said Nasrullah, who goes by one name, during an interview in September. “But I brought only my clothes.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Afghanistan gripped by starvation
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/world/asia/afghanistan-starvation-crisis.html
GIST	<p>SHAH WALI KOT, Afghanistan — One by one, women poured into the mud brick clinic, the frames of famished children peeking out beneath the folds of their pale gray, blue and pink burqas.</p> <p>Many had walked for more than an hour across this drab stretch of southern Afghanistan, where parched earth meets a washed-out sky, desperate for medicine to pump life back into their children's shrunken veins. For months, their once-daily meals had grown more sparse as harvests failed, wells ran dry and credit for flour from shopkeepers ran out.</p> <p>Now as the crisp air grew colder, reality was setting in: Their children might not survive the winter.</p> <p>“I'm very afraid, this winter will be even worse than we can imagine,” said Laltak, 40, who like many women in rural Afghanistan goes by only one name.</p> <p>Nearly four months since the Taliban seized power, Afghanistan is on the brink of a mass starvation that aid groups say threatens to kill a million children this winter — a toll that would dwarf the total number of Afghan civilians estimated to have been killed as a direct result of the war over the past 20 years.</p> <p>While Afghanistan has suffered from malnutrition for decades, the country's hunger crisis has drastically worsened in recent months. This winter, an estimated 22.8 million people — more than half the population — are expected to face potentially life-threatening levels of food insecurity, according to an analysis by the</p>

United Nations World Food Program and Food and Agriculture Organization. Of those, 8.7 million people are nearing famine — the worst stage of a food crisis.

Such widespread hunger is the most devastating sign of the economic crash that has crippled Afghanistan since the Taliban seized power. Practically overnight, billions of dollars in foreign aid that propped up the previous Western-backed government vanished and U.S. sanctions on the Taliban isolated the country from the global financial system, paralyzing Afghan banks and impeding relief work by humanitarian organizations.

Across the country, millions of Afghans — from day laborers to doctors and teachers — have gone months without steady or any incomes. The prices of food and other basic goods have soared beyond the reach of many families. Emaciated children and anemic mothers have flooded into the malnutrition wards of hospitals, many of those facilities bereft of medical supplies that donor aid once provided.

Compounding its economic woes, the country is confronting one of the worst droughts in decades, which has withered fields, starved farm animals and dried irrigation channels. Afghanistan's wheat harvest is expected to be as much as 25 percent below average this year, according to the United Nations. In rural areas — where roughly 70 percent of the population lives — many farmers have given up cultivating their land.

Now, as freezing winter weather sets in, with humanitarian organizations warning that a million children could die, the crisis is potentially damning to both the new Taliban government and to the United States, which is facing mounting pressure to ease the economic restrictions that are worsening the crisis.

“We need to separate the politics from the humanitarian imperative,” said Mary-Ellen McGroarty, the World Food Program's country director for Afghanistan. “The millions of women, of children, of men in the current crisis in Afghanistan are innocent people who are being condemned to a winter of absolute desperation and potentially death.”

In Shah Wali Kot, a barren district in Kandahar Province, the drought and economic crash have converged in a perfect storm.

For decades, small farmers survived the winters on stored wheat from their summer harvest and the income from selling onions in the market. But this year yielded barely enough to sustain families during the fall months. Without food to last the winter, some people migrated to cities hoping to find work or to other districts to lean on the help of relatives.

Inside one of the two mud huts of the clinic, which is run by the Afghan Red Crescent and supported by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Laltak clutched her granddaughter's gaunt frame as if steeling herself for the hardships she knew this winter would bring.

Her family has no wheat left, no wood to make fires for heat, no money to buy food. They have exhausted the support of nearby relatives who cannot even feed their own families.

“Nothing, we have nothing,” Laltak said in an interview at the end of October.

She and most of the mothers interviewed did not own cellphones or have phone service in their villages, so The Times could not follow up with them on the health of their children.

The humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Afghanistan comes as [hunger has steadily risen around the world](#) in recent years, driven by the coronavirus pandemic, conflict and climate-related shocks.

Thirty percent more Afghans faced crisis-level food shortages in September and October compared with the same period last year, according to the United Nations. In the coming months, the number of Afghans in crisis is expected to hit a record high.

“It was never this bad,” said Sifatullah Sifat, the head doctor at the Shamsul Haq clinic on the outskirts of Kandahar city, where malnutrition cases have doubled in recent months. “Donors are shipping in medicine, but it’s still not enough.”

By 10 a.m. each morning, a throng of mothers carrying skeletal children masses in the hallway of the malnutrition unit.

Inside an examination room in October, Zarmina, 20, cradled her 18-month-old son while her 3-year-old daughter stood behind her, clutching her blue burqa. Since the Taliban seized power and her husband’s work as a day laborer dried up, her family has survived on mostly bread and tea — meals that left her children’s stomachs gnawing with hunger.

“They are crying to have food. I wish I could bring them something, but we have nothing,” said Zarmina, who is six months pregnant and severely anemic.

Zarmina’s son had grown frail after weeks of diarrhea. He stared blankly at the wall as a nurse wrapped a color-coded measuring band used to diagnose malnutrition around his rail-thin arm, stopping at the color red: Severe malnourishment.

As the nurse told Zarmina that he needed to go to the hospital for treatment, another mother barged into the room and collapsed on the floor, demanding help for her infant daughter.

“It’s been almost one week, I can’t get medicine for her,” she pleaded.

The nurse begged her to wait: Her daughter’s malnutrition was considered only moderate.

Since the Taliban seized power, the United States and other Western donors have grappled with delicate questions over how to avert a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan without granting the new regime legitimacy by removing sanctions or putting money directly into the Taliban’s hands.

“We believe that it’s essential that we maintain our sanctions against the Taliban but at the same time find ways for legitimate humanitarian assistance to get to the Afghan people. That’s exactly what we’re doing,” the deputy U.S. Treasury secretary, Wally Adeyemo, told the Senate Banking Committee in October.

But as the humanitarian situation has worsened, aid organizations have called on the United States to move more quickly.

American officials showed some flexibility around loosening the economic chokehold on Afghanistan last week, when the World Bank’s board — which includes the United States — moved to free up \$280 million in frozen donor funding for the World Food Program and UNICEF. Still, the sum is just a portion of the \$1.5 billion frozen by the World Bank amid pressure from the United States Treasury after the Taliban took control.

How those released funds will be transferred into Afghanistan remains unclear. Despite letters that the U.S. Treasury Department recently issued to foreign banks assuring them they can process humanitarian transactions to Afghanistan, many financial institutions remain fearful of exposure to U.S. sanctions.

The Taliban government has repeatedly called on the Biden administration to ease economic restrictions and has worked with international organizations to deliver some assistance. But already, millions of Afghans have been pushed over the edge.

At Mirwais Regional Hospital in Kandahar this fall, children suffering from malnutrition and disease crowded onto the pediatric ward’s worn metal beds. In the intensive care unit, an eerie silence filled the large room as children too weak to cry visibly wasted away, their breath labored and skin sagging off protruding bones.

	<p>“I wanted to bring her to the hospital earlier,” said Rooqia, 40, looking down at her one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Amina. “But I had no money, I couldn’t come.”</p> <p>Like many other mothers and grandmothers in the ward, they had come from western Kandahar where over the past two years irrigation channels have run dry and more recently, pantries emptied. Amina started to shrivel — her skin so drained of life-sustaining vitamins that patches peeled away.</p> <p>On a bed nearby, Madina, 2, let out a soft wail as her grandmother, Harzato, 50, readjusted her sweater. Harzato had taken the girl to the local pharmacist three times begging for medicine until he told her there was nothing more he could do: Only a doctor could save the child.</p> <p>“We were so far from the hospital, I was worried and depressed,” Harzato said. “I thought she might not make it.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/03 Taliban bans forced marriages for women
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/world/asia/taliban-women-marriage.html
GIST	<p>The Taliban decreed on Friday that they were banning forced marriage of women in Afghanistan, a move apparently meant to address criteria the international community considers a precondition to recognizing the new government and restoring aid to the war-torn country.</p> <p>The announcement was attributed to the Taliban’s reclusive chief, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada, a cleric chosen as the group’s supreme leader who is believed to be in the southern city of Kandahar. It comes as poverty is surging in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August amid the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops. Since then, foreign governments have halted funds that had been a mainstay of the economy.</p> <p>“Both (women and men) should be equal,” said the decree, adding that “no one can force women to marry by coercion or pressure.”</p> <p>It is unclear, though, how the decree would be enforced in practice. And the statement did not mention two issues — women’s access to education and the workplace — that have been of central interest to the countries and organizations that have provided aid to Afghanistan.</p> <p>Women’s rights improved over the past two decades of international presence in Afghanistan, but are seen as under threat with the return of the Taliban. During their earlier rule of the country in the 1990s, the Taliban virtually cloistered women, and banned them from public life and schools.</p> <p>But a conservative and patriarchal tradition long predates the Taliban in Afghanistan. Customs like so-called honor killings, and selling girls to pay family debts, known as baad, still take place in much of the country, despite being outlawed under the previous government.</p> <p>Forced marriages, too, have become more common over decades of war and societal disruption, as the internally displaced marry off their young daughters in exchange for a bride-price that can be used to pay debts and feed their families.</p> <p>The decree did not mention a minimum age for marriage, which previously was set at 16 years old.</p> <p>With the decree, which was cast as a call to adhere to broader Islamic law about women’s rights, the Taliban have now publicly stated that they are against those practices. They also said a widow will now be allowed to remarry 17 weeks after her husband’s death, choosing her new husband freely.</p> <p>Longstanding tribal traditions have held it customary for a widow to marry one of her husband's brothers or relatives in the event of his death.</p>

	<p>The Taliban leadership says it has also ordered Afghan courts to treat women fairly, especially widows seeking inheritance as next of kin. The group also says it has asked government ministers to spread awareness of women's rights across the population.</p> <p>Despite promises from the Taliban's leaders after their takeover this summer that girls and women would continue to have access to education, some girls from grades seven to 12 have still not been allowed to attend school in some places. And most women have still not been able to return to their jobs.</p>
Return to Top	

Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 NWS: Hawaii faces 'catastrophic flooding'
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/06/weather/hawaii-storms-flooding-weather/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The Hawaiian Islands could experience "catastrophic flooding" from a storm system lasting until Tuesday, according to the National Weather Service in Honolulu.</p> <p>Rainfall total amounts of 10 to 15 inches are anticipated, with isolated areas of 20 to 25 inches possible, the NWS said. Flash flood warnings were issued for the entire islands of Maui and Molokai Sunday by the NWS, along with the eastern half of the Big Island.</p> <p>Landslides are expected and in some cases, highways may be closed due to flooding and landslides, potentially cutting off communities.</p> <p>"Rain events of this size can cause catastrophic flooding and affect areas that do not usually flood. Low spots in roads will become dangerous and impassable due to severe runoff. Debris in streams and gulches may clog bridges and culverts resulting in dangerous flooding," according to the NWS.</p> <p>"Numerous landslides are expected in areas with steep terrain. Urban areas, especially on Oahu, may have severe flooding," the NWS cautioned. "Isolated highways, such as the Belt Highway in the Big Island's Kau District, and Piilani Highway on Maui, may be closed in one or more locations, resulting in long detours or even the isolation of communities."</p> <p>Public schools in Hawaii's Maui County are closed Monday because of the potential for flooding. "Parts of Maui County are already experiencing flash flooding and power outages, causing unsafe conditions," Hawaii Public Schools said Sunday evening.</p> <p>Blizzard warnings remained in effect over the weekend for mountain summits on the Big Island, where high winds and winter weather temporarily closed access to the summit on Mauna Loa last week.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Mystery: Oregon gray wolves poisoned
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/12/05/oregon-gray-wolves-poisoned/
GIST	<p>Oregon authorities are seeking help after the state's dwindling gray wolf population was hit with a string of fatal poisonings — deaths that come at a time when the United States is embroiled in an ongoing debate over how to protect the species.</p> <p>Within five months this year, eight wolves were found poisoned in the eastern part of the state, some alongside other dead animals. An entire wolf pack, made up of three male and two female wolves, was found dead in February and later determined to be poisoned, state police said. A dead magpie was found near the wolves. About a month later, a female wolf from a different pack was found in the area, as were a deceased skunk and magpie. Two more wolves, an adult male and a young female wolf from separate packs, were found in April and July.</p>

The mysterious poisonings — Capt. Stephanie Bigman, a state police spokeswoman, said “poisonings do occur, but not to this extent” — have left investigators stumped. State police said in a news release that fish and wildlife troopers have investigated but “exhausted leads in the case,” and authorities are now asking the public to call a tip line with any information. Numerous conservation and animal protection groups are also offering a combined \$26,000 reward for information leading to a conviction in the poisonings.

“We were shocked and appalled by these incidents,” Sristi Kamal, senior northwest representative for Defenders of Wildlife, told The Washington Post. In a recent [appeal for help](#), the group called the “targeted attack” a “significant blow” to the recovery of a wolf population that Kamal said was reported to have 173 wolves in the state as of last year.

“These incidents of poaching highlight how vulnerable our wolf population is in Oregon,” Kamal said. She said she also expects the reward amount to increase in coming days.

The poisonings in Oregon this year, which follow other recent gray wolf deaths in the United States, come amid an intense legal and policy fight over how to manage the species. Late last month, an Oregon-born gray wolf was [killed after it was struck by a vehicle](#) after a lengthy trek into California. Environmental experts also say the recent poisonings highlight an underlying attitude about the predators that could be troubling for the species if left unchecked.

“Catching the culprit is critical, but Oregon also needs to think hard about what more can be done to protect these incredibly vulnerable animals,” Sophia Ressler, a staff attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a [statement](#) regarding the reward.

The deaths of eight wolves in the Oregon gray wolf population may not have a “significant impact,” Michael Paul Nelson, a professor of environmental ethics and philosophy at Oregon State University, said in an interview. But he said it signals a broader concern for the animals.

“I would say this instance isn’t a threat for the population, but I think what is a threat to the population is the attitude or the worldview that underpins these kinds of actions,” he said. “What might be a one-off thing ... say they don’t get caught, all of a sudden, it’s okay.”

The northern Rocky Mountain gray wolf population — which includes wolves in eastern Oregon, where the poisonings occurred, Kamal said — lost federal Endangered Species Act protections a decade ago. Other gray wolves in the state lost protections in 2020, when [the Trump administration announced](#) it would strip the animals of their protections in the Lower 48 states. At the time, about 1,800 gray wolves were reported present in western states such as Oregon, California and Washington.

In September, the [Biden administration said](#) it would conduct a review considering whether to restore federal protections for gray wolves in the western United States.

Nelson said what’s happening in some states like Idaho, Montana and Wisconsin is a “more serious threat to wolves.” In February, Wisconsin held a wolf hunt a few months after the Trump administration removed the endangered species protections, exceeding its kill quota of 119 wolves and killing 218 in 63 hours. Other states have made it easier in recent months to kill the predators.

Kamal said that without federal protections, “it becomes especially important to strengthen our anti-poaching laws in Oregon.”

She argued the state has “made big strides” in the past couple of years, passing an anti-poaching measure in 2019 and launching an anti-poaching campaign to curb illegal wildlife killings.

“I don’t want to say if you relist wolves [under the Endangered Species Act], that will prevent instances like this,” Nelson said about the poisonings. Still, he said, “that’s the most important thing for wolves is to relist them.”

	<p>He said that at the state level, a critical way to try to prevent wolf killings like the recent ones in Oregon is to “take it very seriously,” which he said state authorities are doing.</p> <p>“Nothing’s a guarantee — people calculate risk,” Nelson said. “But what they’re doing now by being serious shows there is a risk if you do this, there’s a very good chance you will get caught. A lot of the signals that we send as a state and as state agencies are probably just as important as anything like listing.”</p> <p>Nelson said incidents like the poisoning “bring into sharp relief” that there’s a “culture that thinks of nature in this way.”</p> <p>“There’s a lot of, I guess I would call it worldview remediation, that needs to take place at the same time,” he said.</p> <p>Kamal echoed that wolf poaching incidents “highlight that work needs to be done on the ground in promoting coexistence between our human communities and wildlife so we can share the landscape.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/06 China modified weather for celebrations?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/06/china-modified-the-weather-to-create-clear-skies-for-political-celebration-study
GIST	<p>Chinese weather authorities successfully controlled the weather ahead of a major political celebration earlier this year, according to a Beijing university study.</p> <p>On 1 July the Chinese Communist party marked its centenary with major celebrations including tens of thousands of people at a ceremony in Tiananmen Square, and a research paper from Tsinghua University has said an extensive cloud-seeding operation in the hours prior ensured clear skies and low air pollution.</p> <p>The Chinese government has been an enthusiastic proponent of cloud-seeding technology, spending billions of dollars on efforts to manipulate the weather to protect agricultural regions or improve significant events since at least the 2008 Olympics.</p> <p>Cloud-seeding is a weather modification technique, which sees the adding of chemicals like small particles of silver iodide, to clouds, causing water droplets to cluster around them and increasing the chance of precipitation.</p> <p>On Monday the South China Morning Post reported a recent research paper which found definitive signs that a cloud-seeding operation on the eve of the centenary had produced a marked drop in air pollution.</p> <p>The centenary celebration faced what the paper reportedly termed unprecedented challenges, including an unexpected increase in air pollutants and an overcast sky during one of the wettest summers on record. Factories and other polluting activities had been halted in the days ahead of the event but low airflow meant the pollution hadn’t dissipated, it said.</p> <p>The paper, published in the peer-reviewed Environmental Science journal and led by environmental science professor, Wang Can, said a two-hour cloud-seeding operation was launched on the eve of the ceremony, and residents in nearby mountain regions reported seeing rockets shot into the sky on 30 June. The paper said the rockets were carrying silver iodine into the sky to stimulate rainfall.</p> <p>The researchers said the resulting artificial rain reduced the level of PM2.5 air pollutants by more than two-thirds, and shifted the air quality index reading, based on World Health Organization standards, from “moderate” to “good”.</p> <p>The team said the artificial rain “was the only disruptive event in this period”, so it was unlikely the drop in pollution had a natural cause.</p>

Last year Beijing announced plans to expand its experimental weather modification program to an area 1.5 times the size of India – 5.5 million square kilometres – covered by artificial rain or snow. The State Council has said it aims to have a developed weather modification system by 2025, including another half a million square kilometres hosting hail suppression technologies.

There is a growing body of scientific evidence around the success of the technology, but also debate about whether manipulating the weather in one area could disrupt weather systems elsewhere.

In the five years to 2017 state media claimed China had [spent more than US\\$1.3bn](#) on the technology and induced about 233.5bn cubic meters of additional rain. In 2019 officials said weather modification practices, usually the firing of iodine-packed shells to disrupt unfavourable weather fronts, had helped to reduce 70% of hail damage annually [in agricultural regions of Xinjiang](#).

However it has also been used for political and other significant events, including the 2008 Olympics, the 2014 APEC summit, as well as National Day parades and annual Two Sessions meetings.

The weather manipulation activities, also known as “blueskying”, are usually implemented in conjunction with social changes in the lead up to events, including the shutdown of factories, construction and other polluting industries, and encouraging people to stay off the streets or leave the region, said Dr Shiuh-Shen Chien, of National Taiwan University’s department of geography, in [a 2019 essay](#) for Society+Space.

Dr Chien said China’s weather authorities had “institutionalised” climate controls for decades, with technological attempts dating back to the 1980s, but was unique in using it not just for commercial or agricultural reasons but also for “propaganda purposes”.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Western snow to vanish years at a time?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/12/03/snow-water-resources-california/
GIST	<p>A new study provides a glimpse into the future of Western U.S. snow and the picture is far from rosy: In about 35 to 60 years, mountainous states are projected to be nearly snowless for years at a time if greenhouse gas emissions continue unchecked and climate change does not slow.</p> <p>Due to rising temperatures, the region has already lost 20 percent of its snowpack since the 1950s. That’s enough water to fill Lake Mead, the nation’s largest human-made reservoir. It stands to lose another half, and possibly more, later this century, from the Rockies to the Sierra Nevada and into the Cascades of the Pacific Northwest, according to a literature synthesis conducted in the study leveraging dozens of peer-reviewed climate model projections.</p> <p>The current snow situation in the West offers a preview of what the future may hold. Snow water equivalent, or the liquid water from snowpack, is much lower than normal in much of the Western United States. Snow cover across the nation is only at 6 percent — the lowest since records began in 2003.</p> <p>Decades ahead, the “potential for persistent low-to-no snow to disrupt the [Western U.S.] water system is substantial, potentially even catastrophic,” the study’s authors write.</p> <p>Published in Nature Reviews Earth and Environment in October, the paper provides an overview of how Western snowpack has changed and what it will look like over the course of this century.</p> <p>In addition to the 20 percent loss, snowpack is peaking and melting off earlier in the year and is expected to continue on that track. Atmospheric rivers are also warming and dropping more rain than snow, which increases flood risk.</p> <p>The demands of a warmer atmosphere are already translating into water stress. Although this past year was not a “low snow” year for California, much less snowmelt made it to reservoirs because of an unusually warm spring.</p>

“California’s climate is transitioning to a warmer setting in which historical relationships among temperature, precipitation, and runoff are changing,” according to a California Department of Water Resources [report](#) on the 2021 water year.

Snow loss was also apparent during June’s extreme Pacific Northwest heat wave.

“When that heat wave occurred, there was a sharp ablation of the snowpack ... that water was ‘lost’ to dry soils and/or the atmosphere rather than feeding streams and rivers,” said Alan Rhoades, a hydroclimate research scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and a co-lead author of the study.

Western states have only had a taste of what is to come. For example, 2015 was an example of an extremely low snow year in the Sierra Nevada, when peak snowpack was only 5 percent of normal.

Such years are projected to become chronic and persistent, occurring for prolonged periods of five to 10 years at a time. By the end of the century, the majority of years (78 to 94 percent) could be nearly snowless in much of the Western United States, according to one model projection in the study.

The Sierra Nevada could see its first near-snowless 10-year period in the 2050s.

“We don’t have any historical analogues of this persistent snowpack loss,” said Erica Siirila-Woodburn, a research scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and a co-lead author of the study. “That, hydrologically, is a totally different beast.”

While the outlooks are grim, there are steps that can be taken now that could make a difference. In fact, the authors see the paper as a “call to action” for scientists, water managers and policymakers, given the high confidence that snowpack will continue to shrink.

According to James Eklund, a Western water expert and former director of the Colorado Water Conservation Board, not all water managers are approaching the issue with the urgency it requires.

“They are all aware things could be bad, but they haven’t planned for things to be this bad,” he said. “This is an existential threat to the West and our water managers stand on the front lines of our response.”

Fueled by climate change, costly Southwest drought isn’t going away

Water managers are already dealing with increasingly volatile precipitation, swinging from drought and heat this summer to extreme rain and flooding.

“Municipalities and water districts are going to have to accept that the new climate-changed reality will not be cheap or easy,” he said. “Senior water rights holders need to be paid to conserve water and leave it in the river to buy time while they get recycled water systems in place.”

The study ends on an optimistic note, and it lays out numerous adaptation strategies and possible paths forward.

“Banking” unused water in reservoirs, and storing excess water in vast groundwater aquifers during wet years, could help to offset the loss of snowpack storage.

Improved seasonal forecasts can also help reservoir operators decide when to hold or release water, avoiding unnecessary releases if outlooks favor dry spells, or helping with flood control if an extremely wet episode is expected.

“The good news is that we can do this, but we’ve got to act with much greater urgency,” Eklund, the Colorado water expert, said. “All the aphorisms apply here: Hope is not a strategy. Failure is not an option.”

HEADLINE	12/03 Desertification slow-motion climate disaster
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/world/americas/brazil-climate-change-barren-land.html
GIST	<p>CARNAÚBA DOS DANTAS, Brazil — The land has sustained the Dantas family for more than 150 years, bearing fields of cotton, beanstalks up to a grown man’s hip and, when it rained enough, a river that led to a waterfall.</p> <p>But on a recent day, with temperatures approaching 100 degrees, the river had run dry, the crops would not grow and the family’s 30 remaining cattle were quickly consuming the last pool of water.</p> <p>“Fifty years from now, there won’t be a soul living here,” said Inácio Batista Dantas, 80, balanced in a frayed hammock. “I tell my grandchildren that things are going to get very difficult.”</p> <p>His granddaughter, Hellena, 16, listened in — and pushed back. She grew up here. “I plan to work this land,” she said.</p> <p>Scientists agree with her grandfather. Much of Brazil’s vast northeast is, in effect, turning into a desert — a process called desertification that is worsening across the planet.</p> <p>Climate change is one culprit. But local residents, faced with harsh economic realities, have also made short-term decisions to get by — like clearing trees for livestock and extracting clay for the region’s tile industry — that have carried long-term consequences.</p> <p>Desertification is a natural disaster playing out in slow motion in areas that are home to half a billion people, from northern China and North Africa to remote Russia and the American Southwest.</p> <p>The process does not generally lead to rolling sand dunes that evoke the Sahara. Instead, higher temperatures and less rain combine with deforestation and overfarming to leave the soil parched, lifeless and nearly devoid of nutrients, unable to support crops or even grass to feed livestock.</p> <p>That has made it one of the major threats to civilization’s ability to feed itself.</p> <p>“There is a huge body of evidence that desertification already affects food production and lowers crop yields,” said Alisher Mirzabaev, an agricultural economist at the University of Bonn in Germany, who helped write a 2019 United Nations report on the topic. “And with climate change, it’s going to get even worse.”</p> <p>Brazil’s northeast, the world’s most densely populated drylands, with roughly 53 million people, is among the most at risk. The region is known for droughts and poverty, inspiring novels about destitute field workers forced to abandon the land, as well as a genre of music, Baião, in which accordion-backed lyrics tell of the difficult life here.</p> <p>But things are becoming worse. The region had its longest drought on record from 2012 through 2017, and this year, another drought desiccated much of Brazil.</p> <p>In August, the United Nations’ latest major report on climate change said Brazil’s northeast faces rising temperatures, a sharp decline in groundwater, and more frequent and intense droughts. Satellite images and field tests show that 13 percent of the land has already lost its fertility, while nearly the rest of the region is at risk.</p> <p>“It’s reaching a tipping point,” said Humberto Barbosa, a top expert on desertification who has studied the Brazilian northeast for years. “A point of no return.”</p> <p>President Jair Bolsonaro has taken no significant measures to reverse the process. Instead, he has pulled back environmental regulations, while empowering miners and ranchers, and overseen a sharp rise in</p>

[deforestation](#) in [the country](#). That helps feed the cycles of extreme weather. Government data released last month showed Amazon deforestation is at [its worst in 15 years](#).

Increasing deforestation in Brazil has alarmed officials around the world because it threatens the Amazon rain forest's ability to pull carbon from the atmosphere. But it is also a primary cause of desertification, robbing the air of moisture and the soil of shade.

In the Seridó region, a collection of dusty towns, family farms and industrial factories, the residents' own impact on the land is most clearly illustrated by the rise of the ceramics industry.

In the early 1980s, local businessmen saw an opportunity in the frequent droughts. When reservoirs and rivers evaporated, they exposed the nutrient-rich clay at the bottom, perfect for manufacturing the red roof tiles popular in much of the country.

Those entrepreneurs began paying landowners for their mud, and in a few years, dozens of ceramics plants employed hundreds of people. Parelhas, population 21,000, built a metal arch over the main road into town, announcing it as the "Tile Capital."

Adelson Olivera da Costa was a pioneer of the industry, starting as a manager of one of Parelhas's first factories in 1980 and buying it a decade later. At his small plant recently, a few dozen laborers laid out thousands of tiles to dry in the midday sun.

"For us, the drought is good news," Mr. da Costa said in his cramped office. He said he had 30 employees, and neighboring plants run by a son and a daughter employed dozens more.

For an area long dependent on crops and livestock, ceramics were an economic jump start. But in time, the consequences became clear. Factories make the tiles by mixing water with clay, and then firing the result in a wood-burning oven. All those ingredients — water, wood and clay — are in short supply here.

Mr. da Costa's factory, one of the smaller operations in the area, uses more than 2,500 gallons of water a week, pulled from a nearby well. "People aren't sure," he said of the water, "but we think it will never run out."

[Recent studies estimate](#), though, that the region's groundwater is dwindling.

The factory's oven runs all night, Monday to Friday. Just before 5 a.m. one weekday, two men pulled branches and trunks from large piles and stuffed them into six fireplaces that heated an oven the size of a house. The operation consumes 60 to 75 cubic meters of wood a week, or enough to fill five large dump trucks.

Then there is the tiles' main ingredient, clay. Years ago, Mr. da Costa said he bought clay from the dried-up lake beds within a few miles of his operation. With those now depleted, he is hauling in mud from hours away.

Aldrin Perez, a Brazilian government scientist who tracks desertification, said it takes 300 years to deposit one centimeter of soil, while ceramics companies take three to five feet of soil each time they extract clay. "In seconds, they destroy meters of depth that were formed over millions of years," he said.

That can have a devastating effect. The soil and clay they extract is crucial for retaining a proper balance of nutrients and moisture in the surrounding land.

"It kills the area," said Damião Santos Ferreira, the manager of Mr. da Costa's factory, explaining why some people were hesitant to sell their clay. "It's never the same."

The factory pays landowners about \$10 for 30 tons of clay, he said.

By now, most landowners know the consequences. Yet plenty still get desperate enough to sell. One of them was Mr. Dantas.

In 2010, during another difficult dry season, Mr. Dantas said his family almost ran out of money. To feed themselves and their cattle, they decided to cash in on their mud.

“Everyone agreed,” Mr. Dantas said. “It was necessary,” his son, Paulo, said.

The clay came from a reservoir Mr. Dantas’s great-grandfather built in the 19th century to supply water for their 506-acre land. When it evaporated each dry season, the family had planted beans, corn and cotton in the fertile bed left behind. It was one of their most productive plots of land.

But in 2010, instead of planting, the family watched four men with shovels excavate and haul away the soil. It took them three months. They paid about \$3,500 for the clay.

The money helped the family survive through the yearslong drought that followed. But the land around the reservoir was left nearly barren. Paulo Dantas planted corn, beans and watermelon several years later, but the produce was so pitiful, they fed it to the cattle.

Then, last year, it rained much more than usual. The reservoir filled to about six feet. Hellena, Mr. Dantas’s granddaughter, swam in it. When it dried up, the family planted seeds. Grass for the cattle grew, but the beans and corn wilted.

“I really regret it,” Mr. Dantas said of selling the clay. “I saw it wasn’t good. But the children needed it.”

Standing on the reservoir’s embankment, he looked over the parched land as the sun set. “I had no choice,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Seattle mayor missing texts report missing?
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/report-on-seattle-mayors-missing-texts-yet-to-materialize
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - A completed report on Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan’s missing text messages from a period during last year’s racial justice protests has yet to appear as Durkan prepares to leave office — and officials aren’t saying when it will.</p> <p>It’s been more than a year since the city attorney’s office hired a private contractor to analyze the issue and over five months since the office said it aimed to share the contractor’s completed report, The Seattle Times reported.</p> <p>The Crypsis Group has continued to bill the city for its work and had been paid \$407,000 as of Nov. 29. The city attorney’s office said that’s up from \$201,000 as of July 31.</p> <p>But the office couldn’t say this week when the report would be available or what is taking so long.</p> <p>"I don’t have any additional details to share at this point," said Dan Nolte, a spokesperson for City Attorney Pete Holmes. Holmes is also leaving his position at the end of this month.</p> <p>A spokesperson for Durkan said the mayor’s office had nothing to add.</p> <p>The forensic report could be not only a source of information for the public but for several lawsuits filed against Seattle over the city’s handling of protests and unrest in mid-2020.</p> <p>The city attorney’s office hired Crypsis to help with its defense because Durkan’s texts weren’t retained from late August 2019 to late June 2020.</p>

	<p>Texts from at least eight other officials, including the city’s fire and police chiefs, also were not retained from periods overlapping with June 2020, when police used tear gas and abandoned their East Precinct, and when the first of two fatal shootings occurred in a zone on Capitol Hill temporarily ceded to protesters.</p> <p>The mayor’s office knew by August 2020 that her texts were missing and the city attorney’s office hired Crypsis in November 2020. But the information didn’t become public until May 2021, when the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission issued a whistleblower investigation report.</p> <p>Durkan has said she believed her texts were being retained while acknowledging that the way the records requests were handled "fell short" of the state’s law.</p>
Return to Top	

Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/06 Report: ‘hostile behaviors’ jump in schools
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/students-have-faced-a-huge-jump-in-e2-80-98hostile-behaviors-e2-80-99-a-new-report-finds-attacks-with-weapons-doubled/ar-AARw5EF
GIST	<p>With the deadly Oxford, Mich., high school shooting that killed four students this week still raw, a new government study details how increasingly malicious American school environments can be.</p> <p>Analyzing Education Department data, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found a huge jump in K-12 public school “hostile behaviors.” The most alarming statistic — physical attacks with a weapon nearly doubled early in the Trump administration.</p> <p>In a two-year period, from school years 2015-2016 to 2017-2018, attacks with weapons jumped 97 percent, according to the most recent data available. At the same time, hate crimes increased 81 percent and sexual assaults rose 17 percent.</p> <p>The report offers no reason for the dramatic growth in attacks with weapons and hate crimes, but “schools are microcosms of their communities,” Jacqueline M. Nowicki, GAO’s director of education, workforce, and income security issues, said by phone.</p> <p>For students and others, 2017 was a period of political upheaval and racial tension under President Donald Trump. That August, as students readied for a new school year, a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville led to the murder by car of Heather Heyer. In a defining moment of his presidency after the attack, Trump said “there’s blame on both sides.”</p> <p>While schools reflect society, “federal data doesn’t get at why” cases increased, Nowicki said. “We are unable to give a definitive answer there [the large 2017-2018 increase] because that’s not the data the federal government collects.”</p> <p>Whatever the stats say, they probably fall short because “hostile behaviors ... are generally underreported to authorities” by victims, the report said. Another problem — reporting by victim advocates also declined for political reasons.</p> <p>Hostile-behavior complaints to the department dropped 9 percent in the 2018-2019 school year and 15 percent the next year. That sounds like a good thing, until the report explains: “Civil rights experts GAO interviewed said that in recent years they became reluctant to file complaints on students’ behalf because they lost confidence in OCR’s ability to address civil rights violations in schools.”</p>

OCR is the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, which enforces school-related civil rights laws, including those prohibiting a range of hostile behaviors. The loss of confidence stems from the Trump administration's decision to dump Obama administration school civil rights policies.

The Trump administration withdrew Obama policies to "avoid, and remedy [discriminatory discipline](#)" in schools, "ensure that [transgender students](#) enjoy a supportive and nondiscriminatory school environment" and fight "[sexual harassment](#) of students, including sexual violence." Trump officials claimed the [discipline policies](#) were "not required or contemplated" by law; the transgender policies were rescinded to "more completely [consider the legal issues](#) involved"; and the sexual harassment guidance "led to the [deprivation of rights](#) for many students."

At the time, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a broad coalition of organizations, strongly criticized the Trump administration moves, saying its policies demonstrated that it did "not care that schools are [discriminating against](#) children of color" through disproportionate punishments; sent transgender students "[a clear message](#)" that the law under Trump was not "on their side"; and demonstrated an "[unwillingness to protect students](#)" victimized by sexual harassment and violence.

An Education Department statement said that under President Biden it is "fully committed to ... vigorous enforcement of federal civil rights laws in our nation's schools" and will propose certain changes next year, after a review of current law and regulations.

The GAO report was requested by Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott (D-Va.), House Education and Labor Committee chairman. "Unfortunately," he said by email, the report "shows that the Trump Administration's education policies prevented students from seeking the help they needed as well as discouraged students, parents, and advocates from filing complaints with the Department of Education."

In its examination of hostile behaviors, GAO found that "bullying is widespread in schools nationwide," hurting 5.2 million students ages 12 to 18, about 20 percent of the school population, in the 2018-2019 school year. Middle school students were more likely to be bullied than those in high school, and students in schools with 300 or fewer learners were more likely to be victims than those in schools with a student body of more than 1,000.

One reason for the underreporting in some cases, GAO said, is that "allegations are reported but ignored for years." The report cited a big city school district where complaint oversight was "in a state of disarray," and officials "acknowledged systemic failures" in their response to student sexual harassment complaints.

As an example of racist harassment, the report quoted a Justice Department finding that in one western state, school district officials "had actual knowledge of at least 212 incidents in which Black students were called the n-word across 27 schools." Officials there, Justice said, "were deliberately indifferent to known racial harassment of students."

Experiences like these can have "lifelong consequences for students' overall well-being," GAO warned. Even students who only observed bullying, compared to those who had not, suffered "significantly more feelings of helplessness."

Liz King, director of education equity for the Leadership Conference, said while the "wheels of bureaucracy are always too slow," Biden administration officials offer a fundamentally different approach to school civil rights issues, considering them structural and systemic problems and not just incidents "at the individual interpersonal level."

That "attitudinal shift," she said, "will result in meaningful change in policy and a meaningful change in opportunity for students."

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/teen-charged-threats-against-several-schools-bothell-high-reopens-following-closure/5ULDHE5ZJRXJKJYLZGGWDVIE/
GIST	<p>An Everett teenager has been charged with threatening to shoot and bomb his classmates.</p> <p>The 14-year-old faced a judge Friday morning.</p> <p>The teen is facing three felony charges for allegedly making threats against three schools in the Mukilteo School District.</p> <p>Prosecutors said the 14-year-old used both TikTok and Instagram to make the threats.</p> <p>According to court documents, the teen's threats were so alarming that three different parents called 911 after seeing the social media posts.</p> <p>And following the teen's arrest, Snohomish County deputies said he admitted to writing the threats, insisting it was all a joke.</p> <p>However, the court determined that the teen posed a risk to public safety, and he is currently being housed at a juvenile detention center.</p> <p>The teen's court appearance comes on the day that students returned to class at Bothell High School. Classes had been canceled due to threatening messages written on a wall at the school.</p> <p>On the same day, Inglemoor High School went into a lockdown following threats that were made to students.</p> <p>Students at Bothell said it was not easy getting back into their routine.</p> <p>"Last week, I would've just been thinking about all the assignments. Now, I'm thinking, just a little bit in the back of my head, if something like that will happen. And that's pretty scary," a student told KIRO 7. "I feel like nine out of 10 times the threat doesn't actually correlate to something actually happening, but it is still pretty nerve-racking."</p> <p>"It feels weird today. It was really weird on the days where the threats were just announced," another student said.</p> <p>As for the 14-year-old, deputies searched the home where he lives and they did not find any weapons, according to court documents.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Salvation Army bell ringer robbed
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/salvation-army-bell-ringer-robbed-suspect-caught/Q2GMS3BMPVAHXJSSSN6SNM3HDI/
GIST	<p>VANCOUVER, Wash. — A man was chased down and caught by deputies in Washington state after allegedly assaulting a Salvation Army bell ringer and fleeing with his donations kettle.</p> <p>Clark County deputies responded just before 8 p.m. Saturday night to a reported robbery at a grocery store in Vancouver and attempted to stop the suspect as he fled on foot through traffic.</p> <p>Two deputies chased down the suspect and detained him after a brief struggle, the Clark County Sheriff's Office said. The cash kettle had been discarded by the suspect but was recovered with help from a police dog, Apollo.</p> <p>The bell ringer suffered minor injury. The suspect was booked into the Clark County jail for robbery, theft, resisting arrest, and obstructing law enforcement.</p>

HEADLINE	12/05 CBP seizes \$30M fake handbags, clothing
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/05/us/cbp-counterfeit-handbag-seizure/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)US customs officers have seized a container filled with more than \$30 million worth of fake designer bags and clothing at a Los Angeles port ahead of the holiday season, US Customs and Border Protection officials said.</p> <p>CBP officers found bags, shirts and pants bearing counterfeit logos including Gucci and Louis Vuitton at the Los Angeles Seaport on November 9, the CPB said in a statement released December 2.</p> <p>The container of 13,586 items had been shipped from China and would have had a combined estimated recommended retail price of \$30,437,775, it said.</p> <p>The CBP said that counterfeit goods had historically been sold in underground outlets and on illegitimate websites.</p> <p>"The rise of e-commerce offers a haven for criminals who are now able to hide behind seemingly legitimate listings on well-known websites. The sale of counterfeit commodities multiplies the illegal profits of smugglers and traffickers who reinvest the proceeds from such sales into further criminal enterprises," it said in its statement.</p> <p>The agency's Director of Field Operations in Los Angeles, Carlos C. Martel, said that "substantial law enforcement resources" were deployed to keep fake goods out of US supply chains.</p> <p>Donald R. Kusser, port director of the Los Angeles/Long Beach Seaport, said that counterfeit goods were often poor quality and could be unsafe for consumers.</p> <p>"Bad actors exploit e-commerce operations by selling counterfeit and unsafe goods through online platforms, particularly during the holiday season when shoppers are looking for deals," Kusser said in the statement. "If the price of the product seems too good to be true, it probably is."</p> <p>In a release in late November, the CBP said that counterfeit products cost the global economy more than \$500 billion annually.</p> <p>"Counterfeit goods are a problem all year long, but the increased demand for gifts, household products, virtual learning tools, and even health products means that the holiday season is an especially busy time for crooks who are looking to make a profit by selling knock off goods to unsuspecting consumers," it warned.</p> <p>"This year, due to the global pandemic, supply chain crisis, and shifting shopping habits, millions of consumers are purchasing their holiday gifts and other necessities online."</p> <p>In its December release, CPB said that its personnel seized 26,503 shipments containing counterfeit goods worth an estimated \$1.3 billion -- had they been genuine products -- in the 2020 financial year.</p> <p>The CBP recommended that shoppers purchase directly from trademark holders or authorized retailers and read reviews and check for working phone numbers if shopping online.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Charge: Mich. juveniles threatened schools
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/michigan-juveniles-charged-alleged-threats-violence-schools-oxford-shooting/

GIST	<p>Six teenagers in Michigan are facing charges for allegedly making violent threats against multiple schools and another has been charged for allegedly possessing a weapon in a school zone, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office announced Saturday. The charges come days after a shooting at a high school in Oxford, Michigan, that left four students dead and seven other people wounded.</p> <p>"There is a stranglehold on Southeastern Michigan now," prosecutor Kym Worthy said in a statement Saturday.</p> <p>"Thankfully, these matters were all thwarted and no one was harmed. While the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office has always tried to be vigilant and proactive in these cases, it does not mean that it will not continue to occur."</p> <p>Those charged range from 13 to 15 years old. Six were charged with making a false report or threat of terrorism and another, a 13-year-old, was charged with possession of a weapon in a school weapon free zone. None of the teenagers were identified, as they have not been charged as adults.</p> <p>"I urge everyone to be cautious, to be alert, and above all, immediately report what you know, hear, and see," Worthy said.</p> <p>Multiple school districts this week told students to stay home as threats of violence poured in following the shooting at. The Holly Michigan Police Department said threats had circulated on social media and included messages saying "someone is going to shoot up" the school.</p> <p>"Sharing and posting unknown threats is extremely traumatizing to a community already traumatized by a very real tragedy," the Holly police department wrote on Facebook Wednesday.</p> <p>Oakland County Sheriff Michael J. Bouchard said officials have been inundated with threats, which he called "absolutely absurd," and that various law enforcement offices are investigating them.</p> <p>"If you make a threat, we're going to investigate it even if it's not credible, even if you don't plan to carry it out," he said in a press conference Saturday. "And if we find you, and we will find you, we will prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law and one of the possible penalties is up to 20 years. So, it's not funny. It's not a way to get out of school. It's a crime."</p> <p>Ethan Crumbley, 15, is facing 24 charges, including four counts of first-degree murder and one count of terrorism causing death, for allegedly carrying out the Tuesday shooting at Oxford High School. Crumbley's parents, James and Jennifer Crumbley, have also each been charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter. James and Jennifer Crumbley were arrested early Saturday morning.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Israel: teen driver in vehicle ramming killed
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/israel-palestinian-car-rammer-wounds-guard-shot-dead-81578068
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM -- A 16-year-old Palestinian rammed a vehicle into an Israeli checkpoint in the West Bank overnight, wounding a security guard before being shot and "neutralized" at the scene, the Israeli Defense Ministry said Monday.</p> <p>Israeli media reported that the alleged attacker was killed, while a ministry official declined to comment further. Defense Minister Benny Gantz praised the security forces' response and wished a speedy recovery to the guard, who has been hospitalized.</p> <p>The attack came two days after a Palestinian from the occupied West Bank stabbed and wounded an Israeli man just outside Jerusalem's Old City and tried to stab a Border Police officer before being shot and killed. Video taken by bystanders showed the police continuing to shoot the attacker after he had dropped to the ground and preventing medics from approaching him.</p>

	<p>The shooting drew comparisons to a 2016 incident in which an Israeli soldier was caught on camera shooting a wounded Palestinian attacker who was lying on the ground. The soldier was imprisoned for several months in a case that divided the country.</p> <p>The Israeli Justice Ministry said the two officers involved in Saturday's shooting were brought in for questioning before being released without conditions. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and other top officials have praised the officers' response to the attack.</p> <p>Palestinians have carried out dozens of stabbing, car-ramming and occasional shooting attacks in recent years. Most have been carried out by lone attackers with no known connection to militant groups, which have praised the attacks without claiming responsibility for them.</p> <p>Rights groups say Israel sometimes uses excessive force, killing suspected attackers who could have been arrested and did not pose an immediate threat. Israeli officials say forces must make split-second decisions in dangerous situations and that all such incidents are investigated.</p> <p>Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 war. The Palestinians want it to form the main part of their future state. The territory's 2.5 million Palestinian residents live under Israeli military rule, with the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority administering cities and towns.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/05 Forks, PD chief, jail supervisor face lawsuit
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/a-lonely-death-in-jail-an-abusive-guard-and-a-clallam-county-mothers-quest-for-justice/
GIST	<p>Everyone, even her mother, thought 23-year-old Kimberly Bender would be safe in the Forks City Jail, away and protected from the drugs and past abuse that haunted her and fed her depression.</p> <p>It turned out that everyone was wrong.</p> <p>Bender, a single mother and member of the Quileute Tribe, died by suicide in her jail cell in December 2019, apparently after enduring weeks of torment and abuse at the hands of a corrections officer with an extensive history of abusive behavior, racism and sexual abuse aimed at men and women behind bars and co-workers alike.</p> <p>Police and hospital records note that Bender complained, saying she was afraid to even go to the bathroom while the guard was working, and that he'd come into her cell at night to whisper lewd comments.</p> <p>Investigators who interviewed Bender believed her story, but the Forks police chief and jail officials said they were "unable to substantiate" her allegations even as they terminated the guard, John Russell Gray. He then returned to a job as a correctional officer for the state Department of Corrections.</p> <p>In February, Gray was sentenced to 20 months in prison after pleading guilty to sexually assaulting four other women incarcerated in the Forks City Jail during the same time period that Bender was held at the jail.</p> <p>Gray, who had worked for more than 20 years at the state's Clallam Bay Correctional Facility, had been an "emergency hire" by the city of Forks in 2018, where it was believed that his experience at the prison would make him an asset at the tiny jail, which was facing a staffing shortage at the time.</p> <p>It is not clear whether Forks knew he was on paid leave from the DOC while under investigation for a string of policy violations for misconduct when he applied.</p> <p>Hundreds of pages of DOC personnel file documents obtained through public disclosure or provided to The Seattle Times by Bender's attorney show Gray was a problem employee who had been repeatedly</p>

disciplined — and even fired at one point, only to be reinstated — for using racial slurs, intimidating LGBTQ+ inmates and staff, and sexual harassment.

He remained an [employee of the state until January 2021](#) — a month before he went to prison himself, according to DOC records.

“The system failed her”

“I only wanted the best for her,” said Bender’s mother, Dawn Reid, who lives in La Push. Reid said her daughter bottled up all of her troubles. Outwardly, she was vivacious and a help to anyone who asked. “No matter what she was going through, she always had a smile, and could put a smile on anyone’s face.”

But a history of mental illness and abuse — Bender struggled with bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress developed after she was sexually molested when she was 11 — had led to heroin addiction and trouble with the law, her mother said.

“At the time, I thought jail was the safest place for her, so she could get clean. They were supposed to take care of her, to protect her. But instead ...,” Reid said, her sentence trailing off to a long moment of silence. “It breaks my heart to know that the last days of her life were torture,” Reid added.

In October, Reid and Bender’s son, now 5, filed a [federal civil rights lawsuit](#) against the city of Forks, police Chief Mike Rowley, the jail supervisor and several other Forks employees, alleging their negligence and “deliberate indifference to Kimberly’s well-being, medical condition and conditions of confinement” led her to take her own life.

“The system failed her,” her mother said. “My goal is to stop it from happening to anyone else.”

Bender had been incarcerated in the Forks jail as early as 2014, where jail booking instructions placed her on suicide watch, to be checked on every 15 minutes, according to the lawsuit. In 2016, she was taken to the hospital before she was booked. A report by a jail nurse remarked on her “longstanding” history of depression and self-cutting.

Gabe Galanda, the Seattle attorney representing Bender’s mother and son, argued that her mental health issues and tendency for self-harm were “well known” to jail officials when she was booked on three different occasions in 2019, most recently for a probation violation for possessing marijuana paraphernalia.

Megan Coluccio, a Seattle attorney representing the city in the lawsuit, said Forks officials declined to comment on pending litigation.

Gray had applied at the Forks Police Department in July 2018, while still employed as a correctional officer at Clallam Bay. The department was processing his application when the mayor of Forks approved him as an “emergency hire” in October of that year because the jail was down two employees. He was placed on the night shift, working alone, according to records obtained by The Seattle Times.

At the time, Gray was on paid administrative leave from his prison job while under investigation for being verbally abusive and “creating an unsafe work environment” by allowing doors separating prison pods to remain open at the same time — increasing the risk of assault or riot — and using racist language.

Gray’s personnel file contains reports of similar incidents involving calling incarcerated men racist or sexually charged names, using disrespectful language or racial epithets toward inmates and “racially slanderous” language to fellow correctional officers.

He received several disciplinary letters in his file, including one for calling his Asian supervisor by racial slurs and referring to another co-worker by a derogatory term for a gay man. In another incident, he reportedly joked that he had angered a Native American corrections officer and that she might “scalp” him.

While investigating these allegations, which occurred in 2016, another DOC corrections officer reported that he asked Gray if he thought those terms were insensitive or discriminatory. “Gray replied that since he was a Republican, he didn’t have to worry about it ... He explained that President-elect Trump made it okay to say things like that again.”

In February 2018, the DOC opened another investigation of Gray who, during a crowded training session required under the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act, reportedly made sexually suggestive noises during a video demonstrating the proper pat-down techniques to be used on transgender inmates.

Following a lengthy investigation, the DOC recommended Gray be fired. However, Gray and his union negotiated a 15-day suspension without pay in exchange for him dropping two grievances he had filed over discipline for other substantiated policy violations, according to the documents.

That so-called “last chance” disciplinary document was signed a month before he was charged with sexually assaulting women incarcerated in the Forks jail.

Bender was booked into the jail three times in 2019, all while Gray was working as the sole night corrections officer.

In July 2019, another Forks officer observed Gray in the hall with a jailed female “in the middle of the night” when and where he should not have been, according to the lawsuit and a Forks police report. The officer said the woman “looked very uncomfortable” and had a “deer in the headlights” look when the officer asked them what they were doing. The officer reported, “Quite often, John was out in the hallways with the female trustees [sic] at night, one o’clock, two o’clock in the morning.”

A Forks jail supervisor, Sgt. Ed Klahn, who is also a defendant in the lawsuit, reported that he “counseled” Gray but, according to the lawsuit, admitted, “I just kind of brushed it off the side because he was such a go-getter ... I did just kind of swept it under the carpet because I thought he was such a hard worker.”

The criminal charges allege Gray forced one jailed female to perform oral sex in a back room, and then paid her \$200 bail. Another woman said Gray forced her to grab his penis after threatening to “make her life living hell” in jail if she didn’t. Later, he required her to come out of her cell wearing only a T-shirt.

He was not accused of sexually assaulting Bender.

Gray was charged in May 2020 and pleaded guilty that December to four counts of custodial sexual misconduct — two felonies and two gross misdemeanors. The DOC fired him in January.

He was sentenced to 20 months in prison in February.

“Uncomfortable”

Bender had complained about Gray after she was hospitalized on Nov. 16, 2019, for cutting herself while in the jail.

Bender told a police officer who took her to the hospital that Gray had been making inappropriate comments. Her tearful statement was recorded on the officer’s body camera.

Bender, who at the time was sick from heroin withdrawal, said Gray called her “princess” and would enter her cell at night, sometimes just watching her and other times waking her up with “vile” or suggestive remarks, according to the lawsuit and investigative documents.

“He’s starting to make me feel uncomfortable,” Bender said. “I won’t go to the bathroom when he’s on.”

An internal investigation ensued, and even though the detective said Bender’s account was credible, Forks police Chief Rowley found the allegations “unsubstantiated.” Gray was on probation as a new hire with

	<p>the Forks Police Department, and the mayor terminated him for “verbal unprofessionalism” for addressing Bender as “princess” on Nov. 18, 2019.</p> <p>After her injuries were treated, Bender was returned to jail, where the lawsuit alleges her mental health deteriorated. She was hospitalized again Dec. 4 for cardiac monitoring and returned to jail. On Dec. 7, she spoke with her mother on the phone just before 4 p.m.</p> <p>The lawsuit alleges nobody checked on her because of staffing shortages. At 7 p.m., she was found hanging in her cell. She had been dead for at least a half-hour, according to reports.</p> <p>Dawn Reid sees her grandson every week, and those visits are both joyful and painful. “He’s the spitting image of his mom,” Reid said. “It’s almost like having her here. Except, she’s not,” and the tears came again.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/04 ‘Modern-day slavery’ uncovered in Georgia
SOURCE	https://www.rawstory.com/this-has-been-happening-for-a-long-time-modern-day-slavery-uncovered-in-south-georgia/
GIST	<p>ATLANTA — A yearslong human trafficking operation trapped migrant workers in “modern-day slavery” on South Georgia farms, according to a federal indictment unsealed last week.</p> <p>Victims include over one hundred laborers smuggled from Mexico and Central America into “brutal” and “inhumane” working conditions. Under the threat of gun violence, some were allegedly forced to dig for onions with their bare hands, earning only 20 cents for each bucket harvested. At least two people died on the job. Another was allegedly repeatedly raped.</p> <p>When not out in the fields, workers were detained in work camps surrounded by electric fencing, or held in cramped living quarters, including dirty trailers with raw sewage leaks. There was little to no access to food or safe drinking water.</p> <p>Twenty-four accused members and associates of the criminal enterprise that perpetuated the exploitation now face a slew of felony charges, according to a press release from the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of Georgia. The multi-agency cooperation that yielded the indictment – dubbed “Operation Blooming Onion” – may be one of the largest-ever human trafficking and visa fraud investigations in the country, VICE News reported.</p> <p>Only two of the defendants are described as South Georgia business owners in the indictment; most were labor contractors or recruiters. Their alleged criminal mistreatment of workers took many forms.</p> <p>According to the indictment, laborers were charged unlawful fees for transportation, food and housing. And though they were putatively hired for agricultural work, some migrants were illegally used for lawn care, construction, and repair tasks. To prevent escapes, members of the accused crime ring unlawfully confiscated workers’ passports and documents. Conspirators also sold and traded workers amongst themselves, per the indictment.</p> <p>“The American dream is a powerful attraction for destitute and desperate people across the globe, and where there is need, there is greed from those who will attempt to exploit these willing workers for their own obscene profits,” David Estes, acting U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Georgia, said in a statement.</p> <p>“Thanks to outstanding work from our law enforcement partners, Operation Blooming Onion frees more than 100 individuals from the shackles of modern-day slavery and will hold accountable those who put them in chains.”</p>

The crimes chronicled in the indictment were alleged to have occurred in the South Georgia counties of Atkinson, Bacon, Coffee, Tattnall, Toombs and Ware, where local farmers paid the defendants to provide contract laborers.

The crime ring that orchestrated the human trafficking operation reaped over \$200 million from the illegal scheme. Conspirators are facing charges including mail fraud and mail fraud conspiracy, forced labor and forced labor conspiracy, money laundering conspiracy and witness tampering.

Solimar Mercado-Spencer is a senior staff attorney at the Farmworker Rights Division of the Georgia Legal Services Program, a nonprofit law firm that represents low-income farm workers in Georgia with issues related to their wages or working conditions. Among the division's current set of clients are victims of the criminal enterprise uncovered by Operation Blooming Onion.

Mercado-Spencer said the revelations inside the federal indictment were no surprise.

"This has been happening for a long time in Georgia. ... And these people that were arrested are not the only ones doing these things," she said. "I hope (law enforcement) keeps busting these operations because that's not the only one going on in Georgia."

Because it's happening in rural areas, nobody sees the victims, Mercado-Spencer said.

"All you see is, you know, your onions at Kroger. You can go buy them. You don't know where they came from. But this is happening and nobody notices it. And these are essential workers that have been keeping us fed through the pandemic."

Per the indictment, the exploited foreign workers were admitted to the U.S. through fraudulent use of the H-2A guest-worker visa program, which has been booming in Georgia as farmers struggle to find domestic sources of labor. According to the federal Office of Foreign Labor Certification, Georgia had 27,614 H-2A positions certified in fiscal year 2020, up from roughly 5,500 in fiscal year 2010. Georgia is second only to Florida for most H-2A workers in the nation.

Under the H-2A program, worker's legal status in the U.S. is contingent on remaining under the employment of the party that sponsored their visa. Mercado-Spencer said that structure can put workers at disadvantage, with limited worker protections included in the program being overlooked.

"It's not like they can just leave and go work for another employer because the visa is tied to that one employer. So that is the problem with the H-2A visa program, is that it gives too much control to the employer over the worker. And once the workers are here, they are kind of stuck."

Sometimes, Mercado-Spencer added, employers "want to cut corners and make as much profit as possible ... and that's how they do it, by exploiting these workers."

Among the federal agencies involved in uncovering the South Georgia trafficking ring was Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), which is part of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In a statement released Monday, ICE said that Operation Blooming Onion is the first investigation brought to a close under the agency's new "labor exploitation model."

In October, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced a shift in priorities for immigration enforcement. Instead of targeting unauthorized workers through mass raids on workplaces – as was the norm in past administrations – authorities are now taking aim at "exploitative employers" and business that violate labor laws.

"We will not tolerate unscrupulous employers who exploit unauthorized workers, conduct illegal activities, or impose unsafe working conditions," Mayorkas said in a memo.

	<p>Mercado-Spencer said she welcomes the change in policy established by Mayorkas' directives, with reservations.</p> <p>"It's not something permanent. It is not established law. With a different president, things could shift again in the opposite direction. What immigrants need is legislation to protect them."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Brutal, brazen crimes shake L.A.
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/crime/brutal-brazen-crimes-shake-la-leaving-city-at-a-crossroads/ar-AARsCHd
GIST	<p>Crews of burglars publicly smashing their way into Los Angeles' most exclusive stores. Robbers following their victims, including a star of "The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills" and a BET host, to their residences. And this week, the fatal shooting of 81-year-old Jacqueline Avant, an admired philanthropist and wife of music legend Clarence Avant, in her Beverly Hills home.</p> <p>After two years of rising violent crime in Los Angeles, these incidents have sparked a national conversation and led to local concern about both the crimes themselves and where the outrage over the violence will lead.</p> <p>"The fact that this has happened, her being shot and killed in her own home, after giving, sharing, and caring for 81 years has shaken the laws of the Universe," declared Oprah Winfrey, expressing her grief over Avant's killing to her 43 million Twitter followers. "The world is upside down."</p> <p>While overall city crime rates remain far below records set during the notorious gang wars of the 1990s, violent crime has jumped sharply in L.A., as it has in other cities. Much of the violence has occurred in poor communities and among vulnerable populations, such as the homeless, and receives little attention.</p> <p>However, since the start of the pandemic and more rapidly in recent months, crime has crept up in wealthier enclaves and thrust its way to the center of public discourse in L.A. — against a backdrop of COVID-19 angst, evolving political perceptions of what role police and prosecutors should play in society and, now, a holiday season upon which brick-and-mortar retailers are relying to stay afloat.</p> <p>Some wonder if this could be a turning point for California, which for decades has been at the center of the movement for criminal justice reform, rolling back tough sentencing laws and reducing prison populations. Polls in 2020 showed that California voters largely support many of these measures, and both San Francisco and Los Angeles have elected district attorneys with strong reform agendas. However, those concerned about crime and those who believe liberal policies have contributed to its rise have grown more vocal.</p> <p>It is a discourse defined by glaring differences of opinion and, at times, a yawning disconnect between the perception of local crime and the reality on the ground.</p> <p>Dominick DeLuca, owner of the Brooklyn Projects skateboard shop on Melrose Avenue, a commercial corridor that has seen burglaries and robberies spike sharply in recent months, said things have gotten so bad that he carries a gun to work — and desperately wants ramped-up enforcement.</p> <p>"I have never seen anything like it," he said. "In the last two years, I have been broken into three times."</p> <p>At a Thursday press conference, Mayor Eric Garcetti and Los Angeles Police Department Chief Michel Moore said more offenders should be locked up and questioned pandemic-related policies that have allowed many nonviolent arrestees to be released without bail.</p> <p>Moore said arrests had been made in several high-profile "smash-and-grab" burglaries but lamented that the suspects had all been released pending trial. Garcetti said warehousing criminals in jails without rehabilitating them is not a solution, but neither is ceding the streets to repeat offenders.</p>

Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. George Gascón, whose progressive policies around prosecution and sentencing many blame for the uptick in crime, was notably absent at the press conference but said through his office that he is working closely with law enforcement partners to hold perpetrators accountable for such brazen crimes.

The heightened rhetoric marks a departure from language shared by many of the same officials just last year, after George Floyd's murder by a Minneapolis police officer. This has set off alarms among activists who led protests, want to see progressive justice measures enacted and hear echoes of past eras when, they believe, the overhyping of crime led to overpolicing and excessive incarceration.

"They're trying to move us backward," said Melina Abdullah, co-founder of Black Lives Matter Los Angeles. "We don't want to move backward; we want to move forward."

Abdullah called Avant's killing "horrific and appalling" and said Black Lives Matter mourns with her family. But she said officials must not be allowed to use Avant's death or recent property crime to push for more policing, cash bail or other tough-on-crime measures that she said have been proved not to work.

"We need to think about what kind of economic desperation actually creates property crime and how do we get people out of that state," Abdullah said. "How do we create livable wage jobs? How do we create affordable housing?"

Abdullah also warned against accepting claims about crime that may not have a basis in reality — which, as it happens, is something police have warned against in recent days, as concern over crime trends has escalated.

For example, while the "follow-home" and "smash-and-grab" trends in L.A., including upticks in robberies in corridors like Melrose Avenue, have caused concern, they are not indicative of a citywide surge in property crime.

According to LAPD data through Nov. 27, property crime this year is up 2.6% over the same period last year but is down 6.6% from 2019. Robbery is up 3.9% over last year but down 13.6% from 2019. Burglaries are down 8.4% from last year and down 7.7% from 2019. Car thefts are a notable outlier, up nearly 53% from 2019.

More concerning is violent crime. Homicides are up 46.7% compared with 2019, while shooting victims are up 51.4%, according to police data. As of the end of November, there had been 359 homicides in L.A. in 2021, compared with 355 in all of 2020. There have not been more homicides in one year since 2008, which ended with 384.

In Beverly Hills, police stress that crime is rare — and killings like Avant's even more so. Police Chief Mark Stainbrook said that despite recent incidents, Beverly Hills remains one of the safest cities in the nation.

Crime across Beverly Hills this year was down 2% as of the end of October. Violent crime in the past two years is up 23% compared with the two years prior, but the total number of such crimes remains tiny: There were just five robberies in the city in October, and homicides are rare.

It's not clear what reforms the concerns about crime in the Los Angeles area will lead to — if any.

A crime spike in the 1990s led California to adopt policies that toughened sentences and increased incarceration. The reform movement was an acknowledgment that those policies went too far and caused their own injustices. [A poll of L.A. voters](#) released this week showed that public safety is perceived as less of a pressing problem than homelessness, housing affordability, traffic, climate change and air quality.

Jonathan Simon, a criminal justice professor at UC Berkeley's law school and author of "Governing through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear," said it is unlikely that crime concerns will completely derail the progressive criminal justice reform movement that began with Floyd's killing.

However, such concern could slow those reforms, he said — showing once more "how potent the political value of crime is" and how quickly politicians and others can revert to a "crackdown" mentality.

"It's a powerful trope now for 40 years," Simon said.

On Friday at Beverly Hills' Roxbury Park, a handful of child-care providers sat together over lunch. One woman said she had moved her walking schedule earlier each day to feel more secure.

Norma Guzman, who has worked for two decades as a babysitter in various parts of L.A., said Beverly Hills does not compare to other areas in terms of the amount of crime.

"If I didn't watch TV, I don't think I would have noticed the area was more dangerous," she said. "I don't think it is."

But Janette Waight, a nurse who has worked in Beverly Hills for seven years and was strolling through Roxbury Park with her boss' terrier, felt differently.

"Over the last few years, this area has become more and more dangerous," Waight said. "It's not just crime; it's homelessness, and it's just a desire from people to look for quick cash rather than work."

Ruben Urcis, 90, a 42-year resident of Beverly Hills who walks twice a day along the Beverly Gardens Park walkway, said he was not disturbed by the recent string of high-profile crimes, which he didn't consider anything new.

"People might just be noticing this, but it's happened before," he said, noting that his wife was robbed at gunpoint of a white-gold Rolex more than a decade ago outside their garage. Now she wears a "standard wristwatch of no value," he added.

Urcis said the difference with crime now is that it's occurring in public places and being recorded on camera for all to see.

"The people in this community don't feel safe," he said, "but that's been going on for a long time."

Pete Nichols, co-founder of the community group Melrose Action, said Thursday's press conference offered few concrete solutions — one reason the Melrose retail community isn't waiting for City Hall or the LAPD to address crime for them. Instead, local merchants are trying to obtain cameras that read license plates to help police identify burglars who drive through the area.

Many local merchants and employees saw the August killing of 26-year-old Shoe Palace employee Jayren Bradford outside that store as a tipping point, Nichols said, and have been chipping in funds for the cameras.

"It is a really awful situation," he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 DOJ charges 2: Proud Boys ties; Jan 6 riots
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/04/politics/justice-department-proud-boys-capitol-riot/index.html
GIST	(CNN)Federal prosecutors have accused two men of having ties to a Proud Boys leader and being among the first to breach the police line near the US Capitol on January 6.

James Haffner, 53, of South Dakota and Ronald Loehrke, 30, of Georgia were arrested and [charged this week with a felony](#) for obstructing police during a civil disorder. Haffner was additionally charged with assaulting federal officers for allegedly spraying police with an unidentified aerosol while they guarded the Capitol doors. They haven't yet entered a plea.

Prosecutors say Loehrke texted with far-right Proud Boys leader Ethan Nordean prior to January 6. According to court filings, Nordean told Loehrke he wanted him "on the frontline" of the protest in Washington. Loehrke said he would be there and that he'd bring three "bad motherf***ers." (Nordean pleaded not guilty in a separate but [related Proud Boys conspiracy case](#).)

The complaint against Loehrke and Haffner said they marched with Proud Boys to the Capitol and were among the first to overrun police on the building's west side. It alleges they later moved to the east side and dismantled barricades there, helping the mob flood the area. When Haffner encountered police guarding the Capitol doors, he allegedly sprayed them with an aerosol.

Lawyers for the two men didn't answer CNN's request for comment on Saturday.

Investigators said they were able to identify Haffner in part because of a photo his wife posted to social media with Sidney Powell, a controversial right-wing attorney who worked with former President Donald Trump to contest the 2020 election results and is [known for spreading](#) outlandish conspiracy theories. Haffner's wife said in a Facebook post, cited in the DOJ's court filing, that he met Powell at a rally in South Dakota.

Both men were released pending trial. A few dozen people with ties to the Proud Boys have been charged in connection with January 6, and some of the group's leaders are currently in jail.

Loehrke is the first person from South Dakota to be charged with federal crimes related to the riot. The Justice Department has prosecuted rioters from 46 states and Washington, DC.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Texas police officer fatally shot
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/04/us/texas-mesquite-police-officer-killed/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)A police officer has died from gunshot wounds he sustained while responding to a disturbance in Mesquite, Texas, authorities said.</p> <p>At 1:40 p.m. Friday, officers were dispatched to a disturbance near a grocery store at the 1500 block of S. Beltline Road, police said.</p> <p>"During the course of the investigation, the officer was shot, and a male suspect was also shot. Both were transported to local area hospitals, and the officer succumbed to his wounds," Mesquite police said in a post to their official Facebook page.</p> <p>The officer was struck two times, and the suspect was struck once, Mesquite Police Chief David Gill, said.</p> <p>"This was a senseless act of violence that ripped a loving father and husband from his family," Chief Gill said, swallowing back tears. "He was a 21-year veteran of the Mesquite police department. He was a good man, a good friend, a good officer."</p> <p>The suspect remains in critical condition, according to CNN affiliate WFAA.</p> <p>WFAA quotes witnesses as saying they heard around four to six gunshots, and that they were shocked because they feel the area is normally safe.</p> <p>Gov. Greg Abbott said in a statement, "Our hearts are with the family and loved ones of the Mesquite Police Department officer who passed away this evening."</p>

	<p>"This tragedy is a solemn reminder of the risks our law enforcement officers take every day by putting their lives on the line to serve and protect our communities."</p> <p>Dallas Police Department Chief Eddie Garcia tweeted, "Praying and mourning alongside our brothers and sisters from @MesquitePD_TX, their fallen hero and his family. The @DallasPD also wears your patch today, and for as long as you need our assistance."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Key events leading to school shooting
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/05/us/michigan-oxford-high-school-shooting-sunday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Days after a 15-year-old student allegedly killed four classmates at a Michigan high school, the district's superintendent has requested an independent investigation into the incident -- the deadliest school shooting at a US K-12 campus since May 2018.</p> <p>Ethan Crumbley is accused of carrying out Tuesday's shooting at Oxford High School in suburban Detroit and faces a slew of charges as an adult, including terrorism and first-degree murder, among others. His lawyer entered a not-guilty plea during his arraignment Wednesday.</p> <p>His parents, James and Jennifer Crumbley, were also each charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter in connection with their son's alleged actions.</p> <p>The shooting claimed the lives of Madisyn Baldwin, 17; Tate Myre, 16; Hana St. Juliana, 14; and Justin Shilling, 17, authorities said.</p> <p>On Saturday, Tim Throne, who heads the Oxford Community Schools district, detailed in a letter the school's account of several key events leading up to the shooting.</p> <p>"It's critically important to the victims, our staff and our entire community that a full and transparent accounting be made. To that end, I've asked for a third-party investigation be conducted so we leave no stone unturned, including any and all interaction the student had with staff and students," Throne wrote in the letter addressed to the Oxford community.</p> <p>The day before the shooting</p> <p>On Monday, a teacher saw the suspect looking at photos of ammunition on his cell phone during class, which prompted a meeting with a counselor and another staff member. During that discussion, the student told them that he and his mother had recently gone to a shooting range and that "shooting sports are a family hobby," Throne wrote in the letter.</p> <p>The school tried to reach the student's mother that day, but didn't hear back until the following day when his parents confirmed the student's story, Throne said.</p> <p>After school officials reached out to Jennifer Crumbley regarding her son searching the web for ammunition, she texted him saying, "LOL I'm not mad at you. You have to learn not to get caught," prosecutors have said.</p> <p>The morning of the shooting</p> <p>Then on Tuesday -- the day of the shooting -- a teacher alerted school counselors and the Dean of students to "concerning drawings and written statements" that the student had created, according to the letter. He was "immediately removed from the classroom" and taken to a guidance counselor's office, Throne explains.</p> <p>The student told a school counselor that "the drawing was part of a video game he was designing and informed counselors that he planned to pursue video game design as a career," Throne said.</p> <p>Following that discussion, the student stayed in the office for an hour and half as school staff called his parents and waited for them to arrive to the school, the letter noted. While waiting the student said he was</p>

concerned about missing his homework assignments and "requested his science homework, which he then worked on while in the office," the letter said.

"At no time did counselors believe the student might harm others based on his behavior, responses and demeanor, which appeared calm," Throne said.

Upon the parents' arrival, the school counselors asked the student "specific probing questions" about his potential for self-harm or harm toward others, Throne said. The answers he provided "led counselors to again conclude he did not intend on committing either self-harm or harm to others," according to the letter.

School counselors told the parents they must seek counseling for their son within 48 hours, otherwise the school would contact Child Protective Services, Throne wrote.

When asked to take their child home for the rest of the day, Throne said the student's parents "flatly refused," leaving their son behind to "return to work." And because the student had no prior disciplinary actions on his record, school counselors decided to allow him to return to his class, rather than send him to what they thought would be an empty home, Throne explained.

"While we understand this decision has caused anger, confusion and prompted understandable questioning, the counselors made a judgment based on their professional training and clinical experience and did not have all the facts we now know," he said.

Throne noted the decision to send the student back to class was not shared with the principal or assistant principal.

The shooting

Karen McDonald, the Oakland County prosecutor who is leading the case, has said Crumbly allegedly had the gun used in the shooting in his backpack during the meeting with school officials and his parents.

In his letter, Throne said he does not know whether or not the gun was in the student's backpack as it "has not been confirmed by law enforcement to our knowledge nor by our investigation at this time."

The alleged shooter started firing a gun "during passing time between classes when hundreds of students were in the hallway transitioning from one classroom to the other" on Tuesday, Throne said.

"Before the shooter was able to walk a short distance to enter the main hallway, students and staff had already entered classrooms, locked doors, erected makeshift barricades and locked down or fled according to their training," Throne explained. "The suspect was not able to gain access to a single classroom."

An initial review of videos of the shooting shows that "staff and students' response to the shooter was efficient, exemplary and definitely prevented further deaths and injuries," Throne said.

Parents plead not guilty to charges related to school shooting

Crumbly and his parents spent Saturday night in the same Oakland County jail, but were kept separated.

James and Jennifer Crumbly pleaded not guilty to the involuntary manslaughter charges during an arraignment Saturday morning. The court appearance came after authorities had spent hours searching for them, a manhunt that began when they failed to show up to a scheduled arraignment Friday.

Police said the couple was found in Detroit warehouse early Saturday morning, but their attorneys said they intended to turn themselves in.

During the parents' arraignment, prosecutors alleged they allowed their son "free access" to the gun used in the shooting. But one of the parents' attorneys, Shannon Smith, said the gun was locked.

"When the prosecution is stating that this child had free access to a gun, that is just absolutely not true," Smith said. "This court is going to see ... there is far more going on than what this court has been made aware of."

[Prosecutors have said](#) James Crumbley bought the gun his son allegedly used in the shooting -- a 9mm Sig Sauer SP2022 semiautomatic pistol -- four days prior, on Black Friday.

Shortly after, Ethan Crumbley posted a picture of a gun on an Instagram account and captioned it, "Just got my new beauty today. SIG SAUER 9mm" with a heart-eyes emoji, McDonald said.

Jennifer Crumbley also posted about the gun on social media, calling it "his new Christmas present," McDonald continued.

An Oakland County judge set bond for James and Jennifer Crumbley at \$500,000 each.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 'Flash mob' robberies roil retailers
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/03/retail-theft-organized-crime/
GIST	<p>A spate of brazen store heists, in which organized mobs have hit stores as varied as Nordstrom, Best Buy, Louis Vuitton and Home Depot, has shaken the retail industry and created fresh challenges for law enforcement.</p> <p>While large-scale "smash-and-grabs" have been on the rise this year, experts say they hit critical mass in late November, when stores were piled high with holiday inventory. On Black Friday alone, a crew of eight made off with \$400 worth of sledgehammers, crowbars and hammers from a Home Depot in Lakewood, Calif.; a group ransacked a Bottega Veneta boutique in Los Angeles; and roughly 30 people swarmed a Best Buy near Minneapolis, grabbing electronics.</p> <p>Retail executives and security experts say the rise of such robberies — which have gone viral online and in some cases, spurred copycats — is the culmination of several factors, including a shortage of security guards, reluctance by police and prosecutors to pursue shoplifting offenses, and the growing use of social media as an organizational tool. They also coincide with a pullback from pandemic-era protocols that limited the number of people who could enter a store at one time.</p> <p>The incidents have spooked workers, retailers say, as they can involve dozens of people swarming in with crowbars, guns and other weapons and breaking glass. Some have resulted in injuries: Two Nordstrom employees were assaulted and one was pepper-sprayed Nov. 20 after an estimated 80 people rushed the Walnut Creek store.</p> <p>Best Buy chief executive Corie Barry says the high-profile events have made it more difficult to hire staff, particularly in shoplifting hot spots along the West Coast.</p> <p>"This is a real issue that hurts and scares real people," she said during an earnings call last week. "This is traumatizing for our associates and is unacceptable."</p> <p>It also exposes the limitations of security mainstays such as cameras, electronic tags and even a well-positioned security guard, which might deter a shoplifter but have little efficacy against an unruly crowd.</p> <p>Law enforcement officials say social media is increasingly playing a role in the organization and promotion of such events. Several recent store robberies in the San Francisco area, including at Burberry, Bloomingdale's, Yves Saint Laurent, Walgreens and Fendi, were likely organized on social media apps, said Fran Clader, director of communications for the California Highway Patrol, which has a task force dedicated to investigating organized retail theft.</p>

She said the agency has investigated similar incidents in which the thieves didn't know one another in advance. "The crimes in those cases were organized by a specific suspect that used a social media messaging application to plan and execute the offense," she said.

Videos of the coordinated mass robberies — showing people running out of stores with goods, jumping into cars and speeding off, as well as footage of police chasing and arresting suspected thieves — have gone viral on TikTok, YouTube and other social media platforms in recent weeks. Such content could be inspiring "copycat" thefts around the country, although it's hard to know for sure because the FBI doesn't collect specific data on these kinds of crimes, said Scott Decker, a professor emeritus of criminology at Arizona State University.

It's likely the crimes were organized via messaging apps or email, but not in an extremely structured way, he said, with plans being passed to different people who may not know each other in the real world.

"It's the organizing capability of the Internet that I think is really attractive to offenders," said Decker, who studies mass burglaries. "Is this the start of a new trend or copycat offending?"

"Flash mob" thefts have been pervasive in California as well as Chicago, where some prosecutors have stopped pursuing shoplifting cases under \$1,000, said Jeff Zisner, chief executive of workplace security firm Aegis. Three-quarters of U.S. retailers reported an increase in organized crime last year, according to the National Retail Federation. The trade group says such shoplifting incidents now cost retailers an average \$700,000 for every \$1 billion in sales.

Last month, large groups ransacked luxury stores throughout the San Francisco area. There were similar incidents in other parts of the state, including two Nordstrom stores in the Los Angeles area, an Apple store in Santa Rosa and a Lululemon store in San Jose.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) said this week that shoplifters should be prosecuted and vowed to "significantly increase ... efforts to go after these retail rings." He also said he would ramp up police presence along highways and retail corridors. And though the state typically classifies thefts under \$950 as misdemeanors instead of felonies, Newsom urged local law enforcement officials to be more forceful in going after organized retail crime.

"If people are breaking in, people stealing your property, they need to be arrested," he said Wednesday. "Police need to arrest them. Prosecutors need to prosecute them. Judges need to hold people accountable for breaking the law. These are not victimless crimes, and I have no empathy for these criminal elements."

Barry, of Best Buy, says the company is locking up high-value products and hiring extra security guards. A spokeswoman for Nordstrom, which has been a frequent target, said the chain is positioning security guards both in and outside its stores, and it is partnering with mall security and law enforcement to anticipate risks.

"Dealing with run-of-the-mill shoplifting is like whack-a-mole where you're going after individuals after they commit a crime," Zisner said. "But something like this — where it's 50 people against one security guard — requires long-term policies."

Retailers, he said, increasingly are requesting additional security guards and retired police officers, although a shortage of available workers has made it difficult to meet demand. Stores are also looking for new ways to deter theft, starting with bright lights and conspicuously placed security cameras in parking lots.

"It's a perfect storm of opportunity that folks are clearly exploiting," Zisner said. "Historically, we'd only see this at high-end stores where you could pick up a few things and be out with \$5,000 worth of stuff, but now it's even happening at Home Depot."

	<p>The home improvement giant has been seeing an increase in organized retail crime for several years, said Home Depot spokeswoman Christina Cornell. As a result, the chain also has begun locking up high-dollar items and is working with Stanley Black & Decker developing a pilot program that blocks the ability to turn on certain power tools unless they have gone through proper check-out protocols.</p> <p>“The value of any product is in its ability to work correctly — and if these products aren’t purchased properly, they just won’t work,” Cornell said. “That’s the next natural step here: figuring out where this stuff goes and preventing it from being valuable to resellers.”</p> <p>Most items are quickly sold online, on platforms such as eBay and Facebook Marketplace, where it’s easy to remain anonymous, security experts said. But they say the Internet has contributed to the rise of theft in other ways by allowing would-be offenders to coordinate efforts and share footage.</p> <p>Even Congress and federal law enforcement authorities have taken note. A bill introduced in the House this fall would require e-commerce marketplaces, such as Amazon and eBay, to verify the identities of third-party merchants that sell more than \$5,000 worth of goods a year. The FBI is also collaborating with retailers to curb large-scale thefts in stores.</p> <p>“We can’t arrest or prosecute our way out of this,” said Barbara Staib, a spokeswoman for the National Association for Shoplifting Prevention. “We need to change our approach.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/05 Michigan schools order investigation
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/05/oxford-shooting-school-investigation-ethan-crumbley/
GIST	<p>The Michigan high school student accused of fatally shooting four classmates had numerous conversations with school counselors in the day and hours before the shooting, before staff sent him back to class despite finding images of bullets on his phone and disturbing drawings at his desk, the superintendent told parents in a detailed letter.</p> <p>Those conversations will be part of an independent investigation into the school’s actions, the superintendent of Oxford Community Schools, Tim Throne, said.</p> <p>In a lengthy note to families on Saturday, Throne said he had requested that an investigation be done by an independent security consultant “so we leave no stone unturned” after concerns were raised that the school did not do enough before the shooting to stop the rampage.</p> <p>The email also detailed the school’s account of the events preceding the shooting, which took place on Tuesday and left four dead and seven injured.</p> <p>The day earlier, 15-year-old Ethan Crumbley was found by a teacher to be viewing images of bullets on his phone during class. When questioned by a counselor and another staff member, Crumbley said he and his mother had recently gone to a shooting range and that shooting was a family hobby. The next day, Throne wrote, his parents confirmed his account.</p> <p>The morning of the shooting, a teacher noticed drawings and writings allegedly done by Crumbley and reported them to school counselors and the dean of students. Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald described a violent drawing that included the words, “The thoughts won’t stop. Help me.”</p> <p>“Blood everywhere” was scrawled next to a drawing of a bullet, and a sketch of a bloody figure with two gunshot wounds was also found.</p> <p>Crumbley was brought to the guidance counselor’s office, where he said the drawings were merely “part of a video game he was designing,” Throne said in the note. Crumbley told counselors that he wanted to pursue video game design as a career.</p>

Crumbly's parents were summoned to the school, and while waiting for them, he stayed in the office for an hour and a half, Throne wrote, "while counselors continued to observe, analyze and speak with" him.

Once they arrived, his parents were informed that they were to seek counseling for him within 48 hours or the school would contact Child Protective Services. His parents refused to take him home and left, leading counselors to send him back to class "rather than sent home to an empty house," Throne wrote.

Despite the graphic drawings and the episode the day prior, "at no time did counselors believe the student might harm others based on his behavior, responses and demeanor, which appeared calm," Throne said. The matter was not brought to the school's principal or assistant principal, and "remained at the guidance counselor level," he said.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, in a threat [assessment](#) of school shooters, said that "the path toward violence is an evolutionary one, with signposts along the way." One such signpost: "fantasies of destruction or revenge," including in drawings. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), "access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns" can be signs of potential violence "and may escalate or contribute to the risk of violence."

Crumbly has been charged with four counts of first-degree murder, seven counts of assault with intent to murder and 12 counts of possession of a firearm in the commission of a felony, in addition to one count of "terrorism causing death." His parents, James and Jennifer Crumbly, have been [charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter](#).

The revelations in recent days that counselors at the school were aware of the troubling indicators but allowed Crumbly to return to class have fueled anger in the small Michigan community still reeling from the tragedy.

"So many missed opportunities," Casey Smith, 45, whose 14-year-old daughter survived the shooting, [told](#) The Washington Post. "It's such a letdown. It's unforgivable," he said. "I know it wasn't malice ... but incompetence is not an excuse when it comes to something like that."

Throne said that the concerns were "understandable" but defended the counselors, writing that they had "made a judgment based on their professional training and clinical experience and did not have all the facts we now know."

He also appeared to place blame on Crumbly's parents.

The couple "never advised the school district that he had direct access to a firearm or that they had recently purchased a firearm for him," Throne said, adding that the parents were present when Crumbly was asked "specific probing questions" about whether he would harm himself or others.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/05 Drug gangs fight over Mexico resort town
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/05/tourists-bask-on-a-battlefield-as-drug-gangs-fight-over-mexican-resort-town
GIST	<p>Bright yellow police tape fluttered in the breeze outside a restaurant just off the main strip in the Mexican resort town of Tulum, as the lights of a nearby police truck flashed blue and red.</p> <p>Troops in camouflage fatigues stood guard outside the deserted late-night eatery La Malquerida, "The Unloved" – the site of a gangland shooting that killed two female tourists and wounded another three holidaymakers.</p> <p>Anjali Ryot, an Indian travel blogger who lived in California and was on holiday celebrating her birthday, and German tourist Jennifer Henzold, died in the 20 October attack that is believed to have been launched</p>

by one of several local crime groups in an attempt to assert control over the area's drug and extortion rackets.

The attack made headlines around the world. But within days, the scene on Centaura Sur Street was back to normal: on a recent evening, restaurants were packed and the aromatic smell of the copal incense burned by street traders filled the air.

Most tourists flocking to the Mayan Riviera are unaware that they are holidaying on a battlefield, said one local worker. "They're chilling, but they're in the middle of a war," he said.

The violence is not restricted to Tulum. Last month, guests at a resort 100km up the coast near Cancún [rushed for cover after masked gunmen stormed a hotel beach by boat and opened fire, killing two suspected rivals.](#)

The two attacks are just the latest in a string of high-profile incidents along the Mayan Riviera that have put the crown jewel of the country's tourism industry on edge.

Tourists still flock to Tulum, drawn by its yoga retreats and Instagram-friendly white sand beaches and ancient Mayan ruins. The town, which in 2017 declared itself the world yoga capital, is also a fixture on the global DJ circuit.

But the violence has prompted fears that it may follow the path Acapulco – [a once-glamorous resort town now overwhelmed by drug violence.](#)

"Tulum is swiftly becoming very dangerous and could become another Mexican monster town," warns Dr Rafael Barajas, president of Tulum's citizen observatory. "Everyone is extremely upset about the violence. We're looking at this, frightened, and wondering if it's going to end."

Between January and September Tulum saw 65 murders – an 80% rise [on the same period last year.](#)

A US firefighter was kidnapped from a resort and killed in July, while two Mexicans were killed and an American woman was wounded in June when gunmen opened fire from jet skis. Visitors from Spain, Belize and Uruguay have also been killed.

On a recent afternoon, two gunshots rang out downtown but few people batted an eyelid – and a group of traditional musicians started performing nearby almost immediately.

Tourists appear mostly oblivious to the rising strife, as they often do not stay for long, but locals describe an atmosphere of fear and mistrust.

In April, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as Amlo, described the local police as "rotten" and they were replaced by state officers after a string of abuses including the death in custody of a Salvadoran refugee.

Mexico's government has announced plans to deploy a battalion of national guards to the region, and build a base in Tulum.

But Amlo's anti-crime strategy has failed to stop the bloodshed, and murder rates remain stubbornly high. The president has been criticized for his reliance on the military rather than reforming the police, who are often outgunned by warring crime factions.

Local officials say that about 10 rival groups are fighting to control Tulum's extortion rackets and the lucrative local drugs market. "We are facing an issue of supply and demand for drugs," prosecutor Oscar Montes de Oca told local radio.

	<p>Hoteliers have blamed growing demand for narcotics on a boom in festivals and parties, which continued throughout the pandemic.</p> <p>One bar worker said establishments face a choice of paying protection money, permitting drug sales on their premises, or shutting down</p> <p>The rapid growth of Tulum’s tourist industry has brought not just violence but starkly uneven development and serious environmental damage.</p> <p>“If we stay on this path there are going to be more and more shootings and people will continue to sell their places and leave,” said Karla Acevedo, spokesperson for a group of environmental activists, Sustainable Tulum. “Tulum has to decide what kind of destination it wants to be.”</p> <p>“Birds and mammals have been killed on the highways after fleeing big events in the jungle and loud music,” she adds. “Plus, we’re connected to the biggest underground freshwater system in the world and we’re polluting it because we don’t have proper sewers.”</p> <p>A new airport is expected to boost a tourism industry that brings in the majority of the state’s revenue. A record number of Americans reportedly visited the Quintana Roo region in 2020, with about 4 million tourists of all countries coming to Tulum each year.</p> <p>To cater for the growing demand, the building of new condominiums and luxury hotels proceeds apace – casting a growing shadow over adjacent shanty towns.</p> <p>“There’s a feeling you can do whatever you want to do when you come to a place like Tulum,” said Acevedo, of investors, tourists and criminals. “There is so much corruption and impunity; it’s generating a sense of chaos.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/04 Michigan shooting suspect parents arrested
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/us/michigan-shooting-parents-arrested.html
GIST	<p>The parents of a Michigan teenager who the police say fatally shot four classmates in the halls of Oxford High School in suburban Detroit were arrested early Saturday after being the subject of an intense manhunt.</p> <p>The teenager’s parents, James and Jennifer Crumbley, were taken into custody in a commercial building in Detroit after the police received a tip that led them to the location, officials said. Arriving officers spotted their vehicle and moved in to arrest them. It came a day after they were charged with involuntary manslaughter in the deaths, failed to show up for their arraignment and apparently fled town.</p> <p>“We have in fact taken them into custody without incident,” James E. White, Detroit’s police chief, said at an early-morning news conference. “They appeared to be hiding in the building,” he said, adding, “We got a tip that they were there.”</p> <p>“They did not resist” when officers moved in to arrest them, he said, describing the couple as “distressed.”</p> <p>‘Hiding in a Warehouse’</p> <p>Video surveillance showed one of the parents walking inside the building, Chief White said. He added that they appeared to be “hiding” inside one of the rooms in the commercial building.</p> <p>“This isn’t indicative of turning themselves in, hiding in a warehouse,” Chief White said.</p> <p>He said the couple “did not break in” to the building but were let inside by someone. The person who aided them is being investigated by the police and “could be facing charges,” Chief White said.</p>

The person's relationship to the Crumbleys, he said, was not immediately clear, but the authorities "know who this person is."

The couple were arraigned on Saturday morning, where they each pleaded not guilty to all four charges of involuntary manslaughter. Before Ms. Crumbley entered her plea, she was asked by the judge if she understood the charges.

"I understand," she said, tearfully.

The judge set bond at \$500,000 for each of the parents.

The couple were charged in the students' deaths after officials said their son, Ethan Crumbley, 15, carried out the [shootings on Tuesday](#) using a handgun his parents had bought for him.

On Friday, Karen D. McDonald, the Oakland County prosecutor, said the Crumbleys were culpable in the year's deadliest school shooting because they had allowed their son access to a handgun while ignoring glaring warnings that he was on the brink of violence.

Law enforcement officials said that the parents had gone missing on Friday afternoon, prompting a manhunt that involved the county's fugitive-apprehension team, F.B.I. agents and United States Marshals. The search drew in the Detroit police when officials received the tip that led them to the area where Saturday's arrest took place, just north of the Detroit River.

"They cannot run from their part in this tragedy," Sheriff Michael Bouchard of Oakland County said in a statement on Friday, before the couple were apprehended.

Debate Over Gun Access

At the arraignment, Ms. McDonald, referring to the couple's son, argued that the parents had the ability to prevent the tragedy. "These two individuals could have stopped it," she said. "And they had every reason to know he was dangerous, and they gave him a weapon and they didn't secure it. And they allowed him free access to it."

But the couple's defense lawyers maintained that the couple were not fleeing. The parents, the defense lawyer Shannon Smith said, were "absolutely going to turn themselves in." She attributed the delay to miscommunication with the prosecutor's office.

"They were scared. They were terrified," Ms. Smith said. "They were figuring out what to do, getting finances in order." She added later that, "All the prosecution had to do was communicate with me about it. And we tried multiple times."

During a news conference Saturday afternoon, Sheriff Bouchard questioned whether the Crumbleys were indeed intending on turning themselves in.

"Were they actually going to do it? I don't know, but given that they were hiding in a warehouse in Detroit, it certainly raises my eyebrows," Mr. Bouchard said.

"I'm not going to get into the specifics, but I think where they were and how they were seems to support the position they were hiding and they weren't looking for surrendering at that point."

The defense lawyers also disputed the prosecutor's statement that the gun was easily accessible in the Crumbley home. "The court is only aware of the facts the prosecution has presented, but that gun was actually locked," Ms. Smith said. She also said that "there is far more going on than what this court has been made aware of."

	<p>The deadly gunfire in Oxford, in Oakland County — about 30 miles north of Detroit — added to a growing list of shootings this year on school grounds in the United States after a lull during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, when many schools held classes remotely.</p> <p>In announcing the charges against the parents, Ms. McDonald gave a detailed accounting of Ethan Crumbley’s alleged actions leading up to the shooting.</p> <p>On the morning of Nov. 30, the day of the shooting, she said, the suspect’s parents were urgently called into the high school after one of his teachers found an alarming note he had drawn, scrawled with images of a gun, a person who had been shot and a laughing emoji, and the words, “Blood everywhere,” and, “The thoughts won’t stop. Help me.”</p> <p>The day before the shooting, a teacher had seen the suspect searching online for ammunition for the gun in class, which led to a meeting with school officials, the prosecutor said. After being informed by the school about their son’s behavior, Ms. McDonald said, Ms. Crumbley texted her son: “LOL, I’m not mad at you. You have to learn not to get caught.”</p> <p>The shooting took the lives of Hana St. Juliana, 14; Madisyn Baldwin, 17; Tate Myre, 16; and Justin Shilling, 17.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/05 Drug empire built on Syria's ruins
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/world/middleeast/syria-drugs-captagon-assad.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>BEIRUT, Lebanon — Built on the ashes of 10 years of war in Syria, an illegal drug industry run by powerful associates and relatives of President Bashar al-Assad has grown into a multi-billion-dollar operation, eclipsing Syria’s legal exports and turning the country into the world’s newest narcostate.</p> <p>Its flagship product is captagon, an illegal, addictive amphetamine popular in Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. Its operations stretch across Syria, including workshops that manufacture the pills, packing plants where they are concealed for export, and smuggling networks to spirit them to markets abroad.</p> <p>An investigation by The New York Times found that much of the production and distribution is overseen by the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian army, an elite unit commanded by Maher al-Assad, the president’s younger brother and one of Syria’s most powerful men.</p> <p>Major players also include businessmen with close ties to the government, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, and other members of the president’s extended family, whose last name ensures protection for illegal activities, according to The Times investigation, which is based on information from law enforcement officials in 10 countries and dozens of interviews with international and regional drug experts, Syrians with knowledge of the drug trade and current and former United States officials.</p> <p>The drug trade emerged in the ruins of a decade of war, which shattered Syria’s economy, reduced most of its people to poverty and left members of Syria’s military, political and business elite looking for new ways to earn hard currency and circumvent American economic sanctions.</p> <p>Illicit speed is now the country’s most valuable export, far surpassing its legal products, according to a database compiled by The Times of global captagon busts.</p> <p>In recent years, the authorities in Greece, Italy, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere have seized hundreds of millions of pills, most of them originating from one government-controlled port in Syria, some in hauls whose street value could exceed \$1 billion, according to law enforcement officials.</p> <p>Officials in Italy found 84 million pills hidden in huge rolls of paper and metal gears last year. Malaysian officials discovered more than 94 million pills sealed inside rubber trolley wheels in March.</p>

These seizures likely represent only a fraction of the drugs shipped, drug experts say. But they provide a window into the scope of the trade, suggesting that the industry has exploded in recent years.

More than 250 million captagon pills have been seized across the globe so far this year, more than 18 times the amount captured just four years ago.

Even more concerning to governments in the region, the Syrian network built to smuggle captagon has begun to move more dangerous drugs, like crystal meth, regional security officials say.

The biggest obstacle in combating the trade, officials said, is that it has the backing of a state that has little reason to help shut it down.

“The idea of going to the Syrian government to ask about cooperation is just absurd,” said Joel Rayburn, the U.S. special envoy for Syria during the Trump administration. “It is literally the Syrian government that is exporting the drugs. It is not like they are looking the other way while drug cartels do their thing. They are the drug cartel.”

The Rise of a Narcostate

Captagon was originally manufactured by a German pharmaceutical company as a stimulant to treat attention deficit disorder and narcolepsy. In the 1980s, users in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states started taking it recreationally to get an energy boost, banish fear and stay awake to study for exams, work, party or drive long distances.

Its white pills were stamped with two crescents, giving it the Arabic nickname “abu hilalain,” or “the one with two moons.”

After it was found to be addictive, it was banned internationally in the late 1980s. But to continue feeding the Gulf market, illicit captagon production took off, including in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, a [hub of hashish production](#) and a stronghold of Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militant group that is now part of Lebanon’s government.

While the pharmaceutical Captagon contained the amphetamine fenethylline, the illicit version sold today, often referred to as “captagon” with a lowercase c, usually contains a mix of amphetamines, caffeine and various fillers. Cheap versions retail for less than a dollar a pill in Syria, while higher quality pills can sell for \$14 or more apiece in Saudi Arabia.

After the Syrian war broke out, smugglers took advantage of the chaos to sell the drug to fighters on all sides, who took it to bolster their courage in battle. Enterprising Syrians, working with local pharmacists and machinery from disused pharmaceutical factories, began making it.

Syria had the needed components: experts to mix drugs, factories to make products to conceal the pills, access to Mediterranean shipping lanes and established smuggling routes to Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

As the war dragged on, [the country’s economy fell apart](#) and a growing number of Mr. al-Assad’s associates were targeted with international sanctions. Some of them invested in captagon, and a state-linked cartel developed, bringing together military officers, militia leaders, traders whose businesses had boomed during the war and relatives of Mr. al-Assad.

Captagon labs are scattered across government-held parts of Syria, according to Syrians in areas where the drugs are produced — in territory controlled by Hezbollah near the Lebanese border; outside the capital, Damascus; and around the port city of Latakia.

Many of the factories are small, in metal hangars or empty villas, where workers combine the chemicals with mixers and press them into pills with simple machines, according to two Syrians who have visited them. Soldiers guard some facilities. Others bear signs declaring them closed military zones.

The finished pills are hidden in false bottoms in shipping containers; packages of milk, tea and soap; and shipments of grapes, oranges or pomegranates. Then they are smuggled overland to Jordan and Lebanon, where some leave via Beirut's air and seaports. The largest portion leave Syria from the Mediterranean port of Latakia.

The security bureau of the Fourth Division, headed by Maj. Gen. Ghassan Bilal, provides much of the network's nervous system. According to regional security officials and a former Syrian military officer, the bureau's troops protect many of the factories and ease the movement of drugs to Syria's borders and the port.

"The division's presence in the region is dangerous," said Col. Hassan Alqudah, the head of the narcotics department for Jordan's Public Security Directorate. "Captagon factories are present in the Fourth Division's areas of control and under their protection."

Maher al-Assad and General Bilal could not be reached for comment. Officials from the Syrian Information Ministry and its diplomatic mission in Vienna did not respond to requests for comment. The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, has denied that his group has anything to do with captagon.

Other prominent Syrians participate in the business.

A key player near Damascus is Amer Khiti, a businessman whose rise is emblematic of Syria's new wartime business class, according to former U.S. officials and Syrians with knowledge of the drug trade.

Originally a modest livestock trader, Mr. Khiti became a smuggler during the war, spiriting food and other goods between Damascus and the rebel-held suburbs with the support of the state, according to Sami Adel, an activist from Mr. Khiti's hometown who has tracked his career.

As the rebels were routed from the suburbs, he bought up real estate there and invested in packaging facilities that are used for smuggling.

Another wartime rags-to-riches figure is Khodr Taha, a one-time poultry merchant who oversees Fourth Division checkpoints across the country, where he facilitates the movement of captagon, according to regional security officials and Syrians with knowledge of the drug trade.

Mr. Khiti did not respond to requests for comment and efforts to reach Mr. Taha through companies he owns were unsuccessful.

Both men gave back to the government by spending lavishly on banquets, billboards, rallies and concerts in support of Mr. al-Assad's presidential bid this year.

Mr. Khiti also paid to refurbish a military conscription center and other government buildings that had been damaged in the war, and last year won a seat in Syria's rubber-stamp Parliament.

In May, Mr. al-Assad awarded Mr. Taha the Order of Merit, "in recognition of his prominent services in economics and financial management during a time of war."

The United States has imposed sanctions on Bashar and Maher al-Assad, General Bilal, Mr. Khiti and Mr. Taha. It called Mr. Taha an intermediary for the Fourth Division whose businesses "generate revenue for the regime and its supporters."

Captagon is still produced in and smuggled through Lebanon. Nouh Zaiter, a Lebanese drug lord who now lives mostly in Syria, links the Lebanese and Syrian sides of the business, according to regional security officials and Syrians with knowledge of the drug trade.

A tall, longhaired Bekaa Valley native, Mr. Zaiter was sentenced in absentia to life in prison with hard labor by a Lebanese military court this year for drug crimes.

Reached by phone, Mr. Zaiter said his business was hashish and denied that he had ever been involved with captagon.

“I have not and will never send such poisons to Saudi Arabia or anywhere else,” he said. “Even my worst enemy, I won’t provide him with captagon.”

Captagon has probably become Syria’s most important source of foreign currency, according to Jihad Yazigi, the editor of The Syria Report, a publication that tracks Syria’s economy.

“That does not mean that the revenues earned are going back into the economy,” he said. “They are mostly being invested in the bank accounts of smugglers and warlords.”

A Booming Business

So little is known about captagon outside of the Middle East that law enforcement agencies in other regions don’t always recognize the drug when they find it.

And the smugglers employ ever-changing methods to hide the drugs and transport them via circuitous routes to conceal their origin.

Since 2015, authorities have found captagon in the private jet of a Saudi prince, hidden in oil filters for trucks and machines for making tiles, mixed in with shipments of grapes and oranges, and stuffed inside plastic potatoes hidden in a shipment of real potatoes. Smugglers have buried the drugs with coffee and spices to confuse sniffer dogs and sealed them inside of lead bars and giant rocks to block scanners.

The drugs have been seized in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, in the ports of Egypt, Greece and Italy, in an airport in France and as far away as Germany, Romania and Malaysia. Most of those countries are not significant markets for the drug but are merely decoy stops en route to the Gulf.

Saudi Arabia, the largest market, has announced as many as six busts per month, with the drugs found in packets of tea and [sewn into the linings of clothes](#).

In May, after Saudi authorities discovered more than five million pills hidden inside hollowed out pomegranates shipped from Beirut, they banned produce from Lebanon, a major blow to local farmers.

According to The Times’ database, the number of pills seized has increased every year since 2017. The street value of the drugs seized has outstripped the value of Syria’s legal exports, mostly agricultural products, every year since 2019.

Last year, global captagon seizures had a street value of about \$2.9 billion, more than triple Syria’s legal exports of \$860 million.

Law enforcement agencies have struggled to catch the smugglers, not least because the Syrian authorities offer little if any information about shipments that originated in their country.

The name of shippers listed on manifests are usually fake and searches for the intended recipients often lead to mazes of shell companies.

The Italian seizure of 84 million pills in Salerno last year, the largest captagon bust ever at the time, had come from Latakia. Shipping documents listed the sender as Basil al-Shagri Bin Jamal, but the Italian authorities were unable to find him.

The listed recipient was [GPS Global Aviation Supplier](#), a company registered in Lugano, Switzerland, that appears to have no office.

Phone calls, text messages and emails to the company received no response, and the wealth management firm that the company listed as its mailing address, [SMC Family Office SA](#), declined to comment.

Greek investigators have hit similar roadblocks.

In June 2019, workers in Piraeus found five tons of captagon, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, inside sheets of fiberboard on their way to China.

The fiberboard was branded as Quick Click, a company with no online profile, if it exists at all.

Official documents said the goods were bound for a Chinese company, Shenzhen Xiang Sheng Li Trade Co Ltd. Messages sent to an email address associated with the company received no response.

The documents also listed a customs broker using the name Trista at Seehog, a Chinese logistics firm. When reached by phone, she denied knowing anything about the shipment and refused to answer questions.

“You are not the police,” she said, and hung up.

There was one more clue in the documents: The sender was Mohammed Amer al-Dakak, with a Syrian phone number. When entered into WhatsApp, the phone number showed a photo of Maher al-Assad, the commander of Syria’s Fourth Armored Division, suggesting the number belonged to, at least, one of his fans.

A man who answered that number said that he was not Mr. al-Dakak. He said that he had acquired the phone number recently.

Loukas Danabasis, the head of the narcotics unit of Greece’s financial crime squad, said the smugglers’ tactics made solving such cases “difficult and sometimes impossible.”

Spilling Into Jordan

While officials in Europe struggle to identify smugglers, Jordan, one of the United States’ closest partners in the Middle East, sits on the front lines of a regional drug war.

“Jordan is the gateway to the Gulf,” Brig. Gen. Ahmad al-Sarhan, the commander of an army unit along Jordan’s border with Syria, said during a visit to the area.

Overlooking a deep valley with views of Syria, General al-Sarhan and his men detailed Syrian smugglers’ tricks to bring drugs into Jordan: They launch crossing attempts at multiple spots. They attach drugs to drones and fly them across. They load drugs onto donkeys trained to cross by themselves.

Sometimes the smugglers stop by Syrian army posts before approaching the border.

“There is clear involvement,” General al-Sarhan said.

The drug trade worries Jordanian officials for many reasons.

The quantities are increasing. The number of Captagon pills seized in Jordan this year is nearly double the amount seized in 2020, according to Colonel Alqudah, the head of the narcotics department.

And while Jordan was originally just a pathway to Saudi Arabia, as much as one-fifth of the drugs smuggled in from Syria are now consumed in Jordan, he estimated. The increased supply has lowered the price, making it easy for students to become addicted.

	<p>Even more worrying, he said, is the growing quantity of crystal meth entering Jordan from Syria, which poses a greater threat. As of October, Jordan had seized 132 pounds of it this year, up from 44 pounds the year before.</p> <p>“We are now in a dangerous stage because we can’t go back,” said Dr. Morad al-Ayasrah, a Jordanian psychiatrist who treats drug addicts. “We are going forward and the drugs are increasing.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/04 Jerusalem: Israel police kill knife attacker
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/world/middleeast/palestinian-israeli-stabbing-jerusalem.html
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM — A Palestinian assailant stabbed and wounded an Israeli civilian near the Old City of Jerusalem on Saturday afternoon, before approaching two Israeli police officers who fired at the attacker, knocked him to the ground and then killed him as he lay on the road, videos of the confrontation showed.</p> <p>The knife attack was at least the fifth in Jerusalem since the start of September, reviving memories of 2015-16, when scores of Israelis were stabbed by Palestinians in what some called the “knife intifada,” a reference to earlier Palestinian uprisings against Israeli occupation. It also follows the killing of an Israeli tour guide by a Palestinian gunman last month, and a spike in violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank.</p> <p>The nature of the assailant’s death on Saturday led to accusations that the Israeli police had killed him after he was felled and incapacitated.</p> <p>In one video from the scene, which does not include footage of the initial attack, the stabber is seen being shot three times after dropping to the ground. The recording also appeared to show a third police officer signaling to colleagues to stop firing. The two officers, from the Israel Border Guard, were placed under investigation, the state broadcaster reported.</p> <p>The incident led to fears of renewed unrest in East Jerusalem, the center of one of the most intractable issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Old City, which lies just inside East Jerusalem, houses the most sacred site in Judaism, the Temple Mount, and the Aqsa Mosque, one of the most hallowed places in Islam.</p> <p>Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan in 1967 and later annexed it. But Palestinians consider it occupied territory and hope it will one day form the capital of a Palestinian state.</p> <p>Disputes over Palestinian land rights in East Jerusalem, coupled with several Israeli raids on the Aqsa Mosque compound, led Hamas, the militant Islamist group in Gaza, to fire rockets toward the city in May, setting off an 11-day war with Israel. Following Saturday’s incident, a Hamas leader condemned the nature of the attacker’s killing, Palestinian media reported.</p> <p>In silent footage of the incident released by the Israeli government, the attacker walked calmly across a pedestrian crossing leading to a plaza beside the Damascus Gate, a major entry point into the Old City, and a focus of Palestinian communal life in Jerusalem. Reaching a traffic island, he suddenly turned and repeatedly stabbed an ultra-Orthodox Jewish man behind him.</p> <p>The victim was identified in the Israeli news media as Avraham Elmaliah, a 20-year-old who had been praying at the Western Wall, one of the last remaining parts of an ancient Jewish temple compound.</p> <p>The attacker was identified by the Israeli state broadcaster as Muhammad Salima, a Palestinian from the occupied West Bank who had served a jail term for incitement.</p> <p>The footage showed Mr. Salima then attempting to stab an approaching police officer, before running toward a second nearby officer. At least one of the officers then shot him and he was seen falling to the ground. A second video, filmed from a passing car, showed that the attacker had subsequently been shot at least three times after falling.</p>

Interviewed in the hospital by the Israeli news media, Mr. Elmaliah thanked the police for having intervened. “They saved me,” he was reported to have said by [Yediot Ahronoth](#), an Israeli newspaper. “Without them, I would not be here today.”

The Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, also defended the police officers.

“The two combatants took very swift and determined action, as expected of Israel’s police, when confronted with a terrorist who tried to murder an Israeli civilian,” Mr. Bennett [said on social media](#). “I should like to express my full support for them. This is how we expect our combatants to act, and this is how they acted. We must not allow our capital to become a focus of terrorism.”

But Ahmed Tibi, a lawmaker in the Israeli Parliament, and an Arab citizen of Israel, [called](#) the episode “a coldblooded execution” of an injured man “who presented no danger to anyone.”

Mr. Tibi added: “This is a criminal act that requires investigation.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/04 Belgium port city grapples: flood of cocaine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/world/europe/belgium-antwerp-cocaine.html?
GIST	<p>ANTWERP, Belgium — As a teenager in the 1980s, Norbert Somers would roam the port of Antwerp, where his father worked as a customs officer. Biking through the docks and gazing at the ships undisturbed was a favorite pastime.</p> <p>Since then, the port has grown into a sprawling high-security complex over about 47 square miles, with trucks and cranes handling millions of containers a year. And given the port’s size, Mr. Somers, now the head of the Belgian customs’ drug unit in Antwerp, has grown alarmed about one concern: The port is now at the center of a huge intercontinental drug-smuggling operation.</p> <p>“A cocaine tsunami is exploding and expanding in Antwerp and all over Europe,” Mr. Somers said in an interview near the first docks built in the city, in the 19th century.</p> <p>Europe is in the grip of a growing cocaine problem, officials say: Seized quantities are skyrocketing in big ports like Antwerp, drug-related violence and corruption are on the rise in countries like Belgium and the Netherlands, and cocaine consumption and deaths have increased on the continent.</p> <p>Belgian law enforcement authorities say they are overwhelmed as more criminal groups have participated in the drug trade, with violence surging in tandem with ever growing quantities of cocaine. Customs officers in Antwerp are on track to intercept 100 tons of cocaine this year — up from 66 tons in 2020 — an amount equal to about twice the volume seized in the whole of the European Union 10 years ago.</p> <p>Part of the surge in seizures is a result of the coronavirus pandemic, shipping experts said. In the early months of lockdowns, container shipping decreased, as did the number of customs and police officers at ports in Latin America, giving a freer hand to criminal groups and pushing them to ship increasingly large loads of cocaine.</p> <p>But the pandemic only reinforced a trend that has been continuing for several years, according to law enforcement officials and researchers. In Colombia, coca production has increased despite the peace deal signed by the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. And Colombian drug cartels have turned to Europe as their primary destination market for cocaine, according to researchers and law enforcement officials.</p> <p>Europe has also become a major transit point for shipping the drug east to Russia, and to Asian and Middle Eastern countries, according to the European Union’s drug agency.</p>

Public health experts and academics say that cocaine is circulating largely unchecked in Europe and has become more available and accepted in social circles where it would once have been taboo, including among younger users.

“It matches trends in our societies,” said Tom Decorte, a professor of criminology at Ghent University. “It’s a stimulant that allows us to work harder, be more focused and cope with things,” he added, describing the views of many users in European cities.

Four million adults consume cocaine in the European Union, and the use of both crack and powder cocaine have been on the rise, said João Matias, an analyst at the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction, the European Union’s drug agency. So have cocaine-related hospitalizations and deaths.

But another source of concern has been the rampant penetration of drug money in the local administrations and economies of cities like Antwerp. Bart De Wever, the city’s right-wing mayor, said criminals involved in cocaine trafficking were increasingly laundering money in real estate, or using legitimate businesses as fronts.

“Before you know it, they own a part of your town,” Mr. De Wever said.

Antwerp is merely a logistical hub from which cocaine is dispatched throughout Europe through the Netherlands — the “staging point for cocaine trafficking on the continent,” according to Europol.

But the trade has led to a surge in violence in the Netherlands, including the killing in July of a prominent crime reporter on a street in Amsterdam. And Antwerp has been rocked by shootings and grenade explosions linked to drug gangs. Europol and the United Nations said in a [report](#) this year that an increase in shootings, bombings, torture and murders on the continent were the direct consequences of a “booming cocaine market.”

“We are facing violence that borders on savagery,” Eric Jacobs, the head of the judiciary police in Brussels, [said last month](#) at a news conference.

That has pushed Mr. De Wever, the Antwerp mayor, to launch a [war on drugs](#) in his city and to call for tougher policies across Belgium, even if such an approach in the United States has left a [trail of violence](#) over the past 50 years, has not [curbed drug use](#), and is widely [regarded as a failure](#).

Mr. Decorte, the criminology professor, said that the stepped up policing had pushed lower-level criminals out of the market and replaced them with organized criminal gangs, who were often more violent.

“We create incredibly powerful gangs that have money and assets, and they’re able to corrupt whoever they want, wherever they want,” said Mr. Decorte, who is part of an organization in Belgium that has pushed for a public health-based approach to solving the drug problem rather than relying on tough enforcement tactics.

Despite the skyrocketing number of seizures in Antwerp, experts are divided on whether it reflects an improvement in tracking cocaine shipments — or if the volumes being shipped are just so much larger.

Customs officers estimate that they seize around 10 percent of the cocaine smuggled to Europe, with Antwerp and Rotterdam the leading destinations. Kristian Vanderwaeren, the head of the Belgian customs, said as much cocaine destined for Antwerp had been seized in Latin American ports before departure this year as in the Belgian port itself.

“We’re seizing a lot, but is that hurting criminals?” Mr. Vanderwaeren said. “So much cocaine is escaping us.”

Cocaine is often smuggled in containers with items like bananas, orange juice or coffee. Jeans and animal skins can also be impregnated with cocaine, and later extracted in laboratories. Sometimes, smugglers hide for days in containers stored on the docks to pick up the drug, using a tactic referred to among customs officers as Trojan horses.”

Bob Van den Berghe, a senior law enforcement officer at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, said Antwerp’s port was convenient for smuggling because containers are processed quickly in automatized terminals, limiting options for customs and police officers to check them.

On a recent afternoon at a scanning outpost at the port, two dozen trucks lined up for inspection. Sitting in front of a large screen, an officer searched X-ray images for suspicious products in containers. Officials said they were expecting another surge in seizures of cocaine being shipped for the holidays — a “White Christmas,” as the phenomenon is known.

Most of the traffickers in Antwerp are lower-ranking members of the gangs, with the leaders based in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco or Southern Europe, said Manolo Tersago, the chief of the drugs department at the federal police in Antwerp.

Officials have also discovered a vast criminal web operating across Belgium. The interception this year of a million messages on the secured platform Sky ECC by the Belgian and Dutch police led to the dismantling of a cocaine trafficking network in Brussels, to the discovery of drug laboratories, and to dozens of arrests across the country.

At the port in Antwerp, Mr. Somers, the customs investigator, said it was easy to feel overwhelmed at the size of the networks involved in the drug trade.

Corruption was affecting every level of the supply chain: Dock workers and crane operators, as well as customs officials and civil servants, were being paid off to look the other way, he said. More than 64,000 people work at the port of Antwerp, and 80,000 others depend on its activities.

“If you look at the amount of people involved in the business,” Mr. Somers said, sometimes it feels “like everyone is involved.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Retail issue: thefts become more brazen
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/business/retailers-robberies-theft.html
GIST	<p>“Flash mobs” swarm through a Nordstrom in Northern California and two Best Buy stores in Minnesota, running out with armfuls of merchandise. Five thieves steal \$20,000 in products from an Ulta Beauty store in Pennsylvania in just 40 seconds. A security guard is fatally shot in Oakland, Calif., while working with a local television news crew reporting about a recent retail robbery by a group of thieves.</p> <p>Theft is an ever-present issue for retailers. As much as \$68.9 billion of products were stolen from retailers in 2019, according to one industry group. But it has become more visible, brazen and violent in recent months, forcing an industry already buffeted by pandemic lockdowns and fights over mask requirements to deal with a new problem.</p> <p>“This level of violence has taken it to a whole new level,” said Rachel Michelin, president of the California Retailers Association. “No one has seen this before.”</p> <p>Luxury retailers in Union Square in San Francisco — the site of several high-profile robberies this year — have boarded up windows to prevent more mayhem. Best Buy warned last week that theft was lowering profit margins and said it was using QR codes for checkout in some areas so employees did not need to unlock items right away. Home Depot has “hardened” its stores, putting power tools and other valuables out of reach and advising employees not to film robberies with their phones because it could escalate the situation.</p>

“It has become second nature to take out your phone and record something when it happens,” said Scott Glenn, vice president of asset protection at Home Depot. “But these people are getting violent.”

Retail executives and security experts link the thefts to a confluence of factors, but primarily the ease with which thieves have been able to resell stolen goods on internet marketplaces like Amazon and Facebook.

But even industry veterans, who have been tracking generations of shoplifters, have been stunned by the methods and mind-set of the thieves, saying they reflect a sense of impunity.

Some recent robberies — in which large groups rush into a store, overwhelm employees and flee in cars before the police can respond — recall the looting that occurred across the country amid protests after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. At that time, people took advantage of police departments stretched by the protests and ransacked hundreds of stores, including the Macy’s in Herald Square and [many smaller](#) retailers, causing millions of dollars in damage.

As tensions flared across the nation, major retailers like Nordstrom and Target [would not discuss the extent of damage](#) to their stores or how many they had to close during protests, instead focusing on their empathy for the demonstrators. The designer Marc Jacobs wrote on Instagram: “NEVER let them convince you that broken glass or property is violence,” adding, “Property can be replaced, human lives CANNOT.”

With the unrest subsided, retailers are less reluctant to talk publicly about theft. “Looting in general started during civil unrest, and it has now evolved,” said Ben Dugan, president of the Coalition of Law Enforcement and Retail, a trade group focused on crime at retailers. “Criminal organizations saw during civil unrest that they were able to get their hands on millions of dollars of stolen product very quickly.”

The rise in thefts comes as punishments for retail theft have been broadly eased over the past decade.

Since 2005, 30 states have increased the dollar threshold for theft offenses, which effectively means that fewer people are going to jail for smaller thefts, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. More than half the states now have a felony theft threshold of \$1,000 or more.

The theft laws were changed to help reduce incarceration rates across the country, and [some studies](#) have found that the lower penalties have not led to more crime. And many of the most brazen crimes committed around Thanksgiving far exceeded the \$1,000 threshold.

Still, the thefts are being politicized, with some leaders saying they show the failure of decriminalization efforts. Others worry that the recent crimes could be used as a pretext to ratchet up penalties and incarceration rates again.

Some industry experts say the problem is not necessarily the laws but the lack of enforcement by the police and prosecutors, which emboldens enterprising thieves. A big priority, they say, should be breaking up the criminal organizations directing and profiting the most from the thefts.

Ms. Michelin, the head of the California retail trade group, has been meeting with local prosecutors and the governor’s office, which has established a task force on organized retail crime, trying to raise the urgency of prosecuting these cases.

“The level of organized retail theft we are seeing is simply unacceptable,” Gov. Gavin Newsom of California said in a statement. “Businesses and customers should feel safe while doing their holiday shopping.”

Speaking to reporters on Friday, Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said federal law enforcement officials had been “in contact with jurisdictions where we have seen this high level of retail theft.” She added that the F.B.I. was working with a task force led by the Los Angeles Police Department and that the

Justice Department was providing money to hire 50 additional police officers in San Francisco. Both cities have experienced high-profile retail robberies in recent weeks.

Mr. Dugan, who has worked with a slew of major retailers and [pharmacy chains like Walgreens](#), said that often, the people snatching items are paid small fees like \$500 for each robbery, which then feed larger enterprises that resell the goods online. Typically, these robberies don't involve large groups looting stores but, instead, are smaller thefts that build over time.

In one recent case, a 70-year-old man in Atlanta paid recovering drug addicts to steal razors and health products from stores like Target, CVS and Publix and take them to his warehouse, according to court documents.

The man, Robert Whitley, then sold the items online through businesses called Closeout Express and Essential Daily Discounts. He sold more than 140,000 items on Amazon's marketplace, totaling \$3.5 million, according to federal prosecutors.

Mr. Whitley's lawyer said the thefts never involved violence. He said Mr. Whitley, who had struggled with drug addiction himself, ran support groups and provided shelter for others struggling with substance abuse.

Mr. Whitley, who pleaded guilty to one count of interstate transportation of stolen property, was sentenced in October to nearly six years in federal prison. His daughter, Noni Whitley, who was accused of being part of the illegal operation, was sentenced to five years.

Similar cases have occurred from Katy, Texas, to Charlotte, N.C., and help explain why, in many big-box chains and drugstores around the country, items like teeth-whitening strips and razor blades are increasingly being put behind lock and key.

Stolen goods used to show up at flea markets and pawnshops, but that has changed in recent years. One of the biggest issues that brick-and-mortar retailers have been grappling with is the rapid growth of online marketplaces where anyone can easily sell goods, often anonymously.

"Amazon, eBay, Facebook Marketplace, OfferUp, Etsy — all of those are utilized by illicit online sellers, and they're allowed to get away with it because the illicit sellers are allowed to operate with anonymity on the internet," Mr. Dugan said. "They don't have to list their real name or real address or location or their real banking information. So no one is concerned about being caught if they're not even using their real name."

Consumers are often unaware of the provenance of items they're buying, but issues can emerge with products like baby formula, which can be expired or otherwise compromised when stolen.

The anonymity reflects yet another instance in which criminals stymied by rules in the physical world can operate freely on the internet — an issue that has surfaced in problems involving misinformation, [questionable advertisements](#) and merchandise [glorifying crimes](#).

Pawnshops, for example, are regulated in almost every state, said Richard Rossman, a sergeant with the Broward County Sheriff's Office in Florida who is also part of the Coalition of Law Enforcement and Retail.

"If you're going to sell an item to a pawnshop, the seller has to pledge that property is his or hers, it is not stolen, and the pawnshop documents the item appropriately on a state-regulated form and we can hold the seller accountable and the pawnshop accountable," Sergeant Rossman said. "There's no mechanism in place right now that requires the collection of that data on the online marketplaces."

The coalition has gotten support from industry groups and retailers, including pharmacy chains, Home Depot and Ulta Beauty, on bipartisan legislation known as the [INFORM Consumers Act](#). The bill would

require online marketplaces to authenticate the identity of “high-volume third-party sellers,” including their bank account information and tax identification, and allow consumers to see basic identification and contact information for those sellers. The rule would apply to vendors who made 200 or more discrete sales in a year amounting to \$5,000 or more.

Etsy, OfferUp and eBay said they supported the legislation after [opposing a draft](#) that raised privacy and safety concerns for sellers, especially people selling small-scale items like a couch or people with craft businesses at home. Etsy noted that mass-produced items were not usually allowed on its marketplace, even if they were being sold legitimately. Meta, which owns Facebook Marketplace, and the RealReal, which sells high-end secondhand goods, declined to comment on the legislation.

Meta said that Facebook Marketplace users could report items they thought were stolen and that law enforcement could contact the company regarding suspicious items.

Amazon said in a statement that “we regularly request invoices, purchase orders or other proofs of sourcing when we have concerns about how a seller may have obtained particular products that they want to sell.” It added that it employed 10,000 people working to prevent fraud and abuse on its site, and supported the INFORM Consumers Act.

Several marketplaces said they shared product information with LeadsOnline, a database that law enforcement can use to search for specific items on their sites. Nathan Garnett, general counsel of OfferUp, said that the site had methods for proactively identifying suspicious items but that catching lawbreakers could be challenging.

“Whether or not we catch it is going to be somewhat dependent on how smart they are, because one account that posts dozens or hundreds of, say, brand-new power tools, we’re going to flag that as being pretty suspicious and action that pretty quickly,” Mr. Garnett said. “But if you only post one or two things, that could be anybody.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/03 Racial disparities WSP traffic stops?
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/study-yields-mixed-results-racial-disparities-during-washington-state-patrol-traffic-stops/SC50RWSJCRGHXEZKJKVQP3RB74/
GIST	<p>A new study provides five years of data on traffic stops made by Washington State Patrol, demonstrating mixed results related to racial disparities.</p> <p>The study comes courtesy of researchers at Washington State University, analyzing over 3.4 million traffic stops, 47,000 calls for service, and 175,000 collisions between January of 2015 and December of 2019.</p> <p>While it says that it found “no evidence for intentional, agency-level racial bias,” it also showed some disparities in racial demographics most likely to be pulled over, cited, and searched. Over the five-year period it pulled data from, 5.7% of all traffic stops involved a Black driver, despite that demographic making up roughly 4.4% of the state’s population.</p> <p>The highest rate of racial disparities involving Black drivers was seen in Pierce County, comprising 12.7% of traffic stops despite making up 7.7% of the county’s population. That was followed by King County, where Black motorists — comprising 7% of the county’s population — made up 11.5% of traffic stops.</p> <p>White drivers made up 74.4% of traffic stops statewide, while comprising 78.5% of Washington’s population. Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic drivers were stopped by troopers at lower rates compared to their population.</p> <p>Disproportionate practices were seen among the racial groups most likely to be searched. While Native American, Hispanic, and Black drivers were more likely to be searched than white drivers, so-called “hit</p>

	<p>rates” — the rate at which searches turned up contraband — were lower among the former group compared to searches of the latter.</p> <p>“Particularly for Black and Hispanic motorists, searches were less productive (10% difference in contraband found) which may indicate that probable cause standards are lower for searches of these groups,” the study notes.</p> <p>In terms of traffic citations, “white motorists received the most, but their overall proportion of total citations fell over the five-year period.” Native American and Black drivers were found to be less likely to be cited compared to white drivers, while Asian/Pacific Island and Hispanic drivers were more likely to be cited.</p> <p>Moving forward, WSU’s Division of Government Studies and Services plans to “work with WSP to study and better understand areas of apparent, unexplained disparities for Black and Hispanic drivers.”</p> <p>“Researchers plan to conduct in-person focus groups with community members to learn about their experiences and relationship with officers,” it said in a press release.</p>
Return to Top	You can read the full study at this link .

HEADLINE	12/03 Explosive set off outside Islamic Center
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/explosive-set-off-outside-islamic-center-olympia/EGMWJ6JJ6FCENGKYHOCLV2BZEY/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. — Community groups are standing with the Islamic Center of Olympia Friday after someone set off an explosion there last month.</p> <p>Surveillance video released by the Council on American Islamic Relations — or CAIR — shows a car slow down in front of the building and something drops from the window, which then explodes as the car speeds off.</p> <p>The incident happened Nov. 23 at 11:23 p.m. People living as far as two miles away reported hearing the explosion.</p> <p>“There have been protests with people outside the mosque with hateful banners, screaming just hateful vitriolic things just as a show of like disrespect to the community. I’m not saying it’s tied into this specific attack, but there’s this sense of impunity when it comes to islamophobia in this country. It’s almost as if there’s a sense that, ‘if I express anti Muslim bigotry, if I express some violent rhetoric toward Muslims, I’m not going to get punished for it,’” executive director of CAIR Washington Imraan Siddiqi said.</p> <p>Thurston County deputies were dispatched to the scene. No one was hurt and nothing was damaged in the explosion but leaders at the center said that doesn’t make it less serious.</p> <p>CAIR Washington released a statement on Thursday that read in part:</p> <p>“An appropriate response is needed to inhibit future such acts and assure communities like ours that we are able to practice our faith, or any faith, or no faith, freely and without fear or intimidation or violence, because we belong here!”</p> <p>The explosion was at least the eighth incident in the last few months where a crime has been committed at a place of worship.</p> <p>In October, someone started a fire inside the Islamic Center of Tacoma while people worshipped inside. A few weeks earlier, a mosque in Mountlake Terrace was vandalized.</p> <p>Police made arrests in both cases.</p>

HEADLINE	12/04 Police: man shot near International District
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/police-man-shot-near-kobe-terrace-park-in-chinatown
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Authorities are investigating a shooting that injured a man late near a park in the Chinatown International District late Friday night.</p> <p>The Seattle Police Department were called to 6th Avenue South and South Washington Street at about 11:15 p.m. for reports of a shooting. Officers found a man with a gunshot wound to his stomach and began first aid.</p> <p>The 38-year-old victim was taken to Harborview Medical Center in stable condition, police said.</p> <p>Detective interviewed multiple witnesses, with "varying accounts" of the moments that led up to the shooting.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 SPD investigates 5 overnight shootings
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/violent-night-seattle-police-investigating-5-shootings-2-seriously-hurt
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - A man and a teenage girl were seriously hurt in two of five shootings overnight in Seattle.</p> <p>According to the Seattle Police Department, around 3:30 a.m. Friday officers found a 15-year-old girl with gunshot wounds to her legs inside a stolen Jeep. The bullet-riddled vehicle was on South Eddy Street just east of Martin Luther King Jr Way. S.</p> <p>Investigators said they found more than two dozen rounds had been fired at a shooting scene a few blocks away. They also found a gun near the scene, and a bulletproof vest, ski mask, and a large stack of cash in the Jeep.</p> <p>Detectives said the victim was "evasive" about the circumstances of the shooting.</p> <p>Another shooting was reported at 9:00 p.m. Thursday at 3rd and Pike in Downtown Seattle. The victim was gone from the scene when officers arrived, but that person, a 29-year-old man, later showed up with serious injuries at Harborview Medical Center. It's unclear what led to the shooting.</p> <p>No injuries in three other shootings</p> <p>Officers were called around 4:30 p.m. to a report of gunfire near Garfield High School in the Central District. Nobody was injured in the shooting, but detectives found evidence of three dozen shots fired in the incident.</p> <p>Students and staff were at school conducting sports practices and after-school activities when the shooting occurred near campus. The district issued a shelter-in-place order for 20 minutes. While the shooting was not a school incident, a representative for Seattle Public Schools said in a statement, "It is unacceptable that this criminal activity and violence occurred anywhere near our schools. The risk and trauma to our students, families and staff is even more intolerable."</p> <p>Out of caution, SPS increased security district-wide at home games scheduled for Friday. A representative said the extra security would also be in place at next week's home games.</p> <p>At 8:15 p.m., police were called to a reported road rage shooting on State Route 509 near the 1st Avenue South Bridge in Georgetown. The victim told police that a suspect in a black sedan fired a gun at them. The victim was not hurt in the shooting.</p> <p>Around 9:10 p.m., a passenger in a gray sedan fired at another car in Rainier Beach. Police said nobody was hurt.</p>

	All of the shootings remain under investigation. Anyone with information on any of the shootings is asked to call the SPD Violent Crime Tip Line at 206-233-5000.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/03 Trial date set for Pierce Co. sheriff
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/report-trial-date-set-for-pierce-county-sheriff-ed-troyer-for-encounter-involving-black-newspaper-carrier
GIST	<p>PIERCE COUNTY, Wash. - A trial date has been set for Pierce County Sheriff Ed Troyer on false reporting charges in response to a January incident involving a Black newspaper carrier, The Seattle Times reports.</p> <p>On Jan. 27, Troyer called dispatch and said a man was going from driveway to driveway and appeared to be prowling.</p> <p>Troyer said he started following the man, identified as 24-year-old Sedrick Altheimer, after hearing a noise and seeing "suspicious activity in his neighborhood."</p> <p>Troyer said in his 911 call that Altheimer had threatened to kill him. He later denied that claim when questioned by Tacoma Police, who arrived at the scene.</p> <p>Dispatch alerted 19 law enforcement agencies in the South Sound to an "officer needs help" call, prompting 42 units to respond. The massive response was called off after a Tacoma police officer arrived and said "we don't need the whole world here."</p> <p>Pierce County hired an outside investigator to probe whether any potential biases or prejudices took place that night and whether or not Troyer misused his authority as sheriff.</p> <p>The independent investigation found that he had violated department policies.</p> <p>During a virtual Zoom hearing in Pierce County District Court on Friday, a judge approved a July 11 trial state date, according to The Seattle Times.</p> <p>A Kitsap County judge is presiding over the case.</p> <p>Altheimer has also filed a civil rights lawsuit against Troyer and Pierce County seeking millions of dollars in damages.</p> <p>Troyer is a 35-year veteran of the Pierce County Sheriff's Office. He had been the agency's media spokesperson before being elected as sheriff last year.</p>
Return to Top	

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[Return to Top](#)